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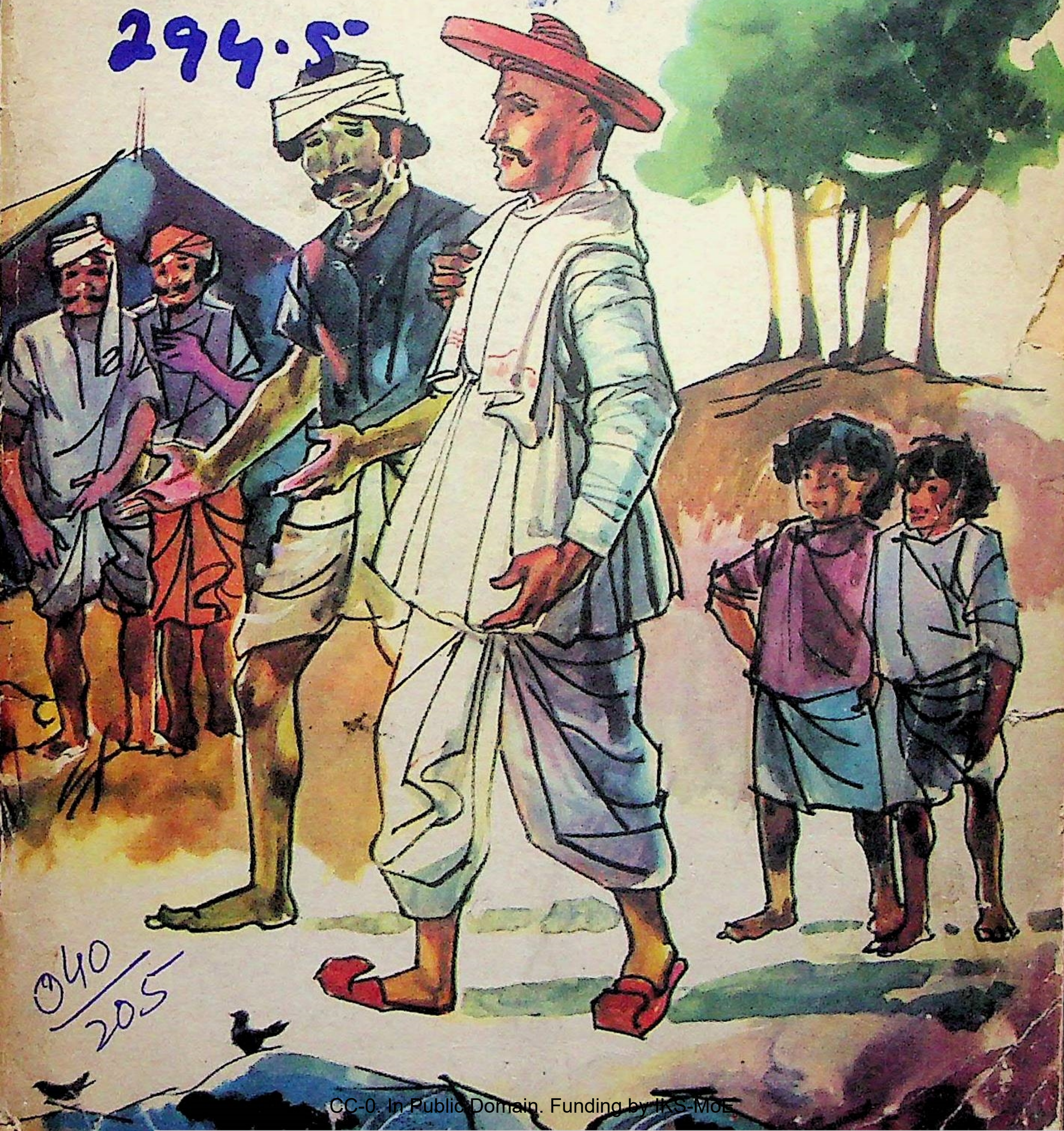

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Nehru Bal Pustakalaya—44

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Some Indian Saints

Gopinath Talwalkar

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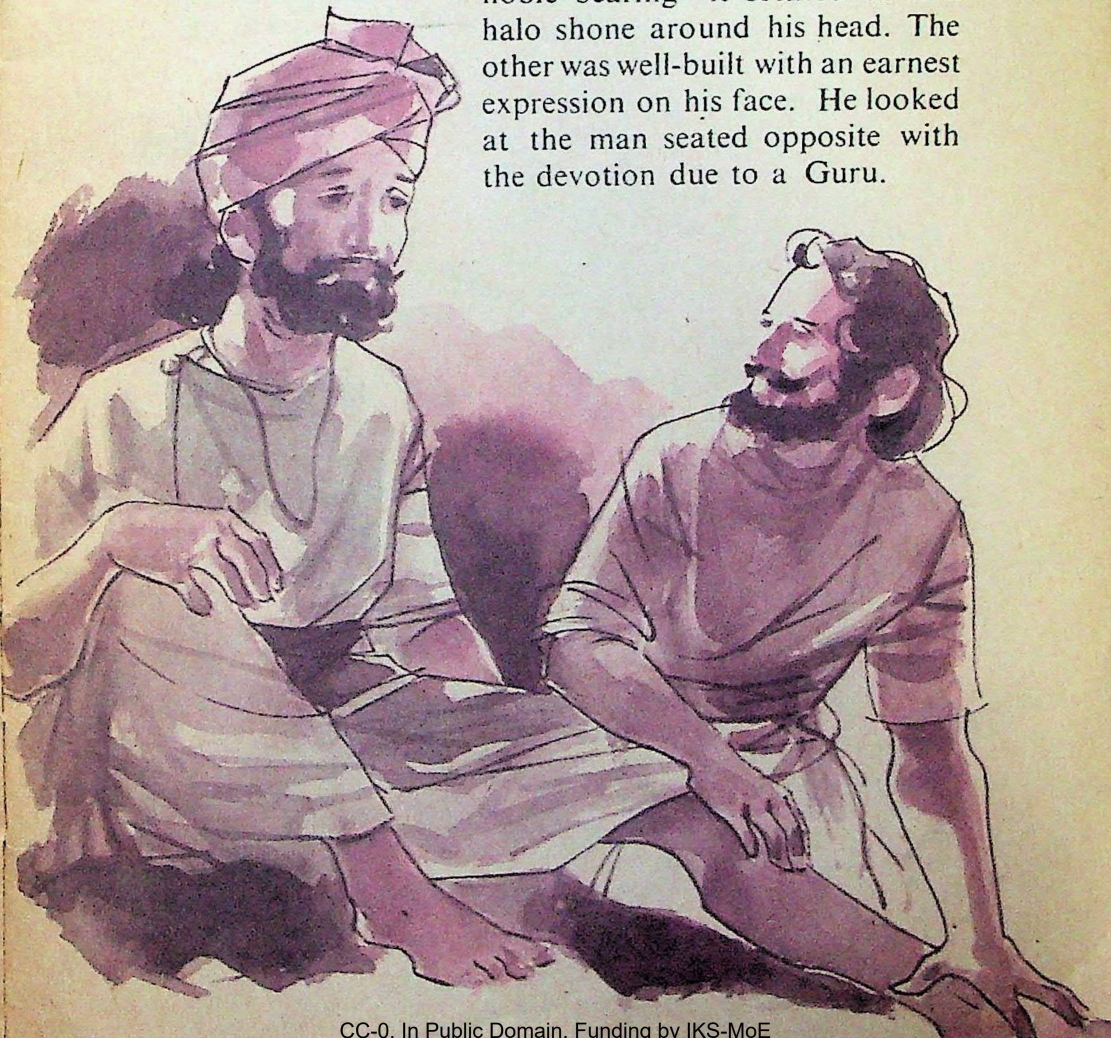
NANAK

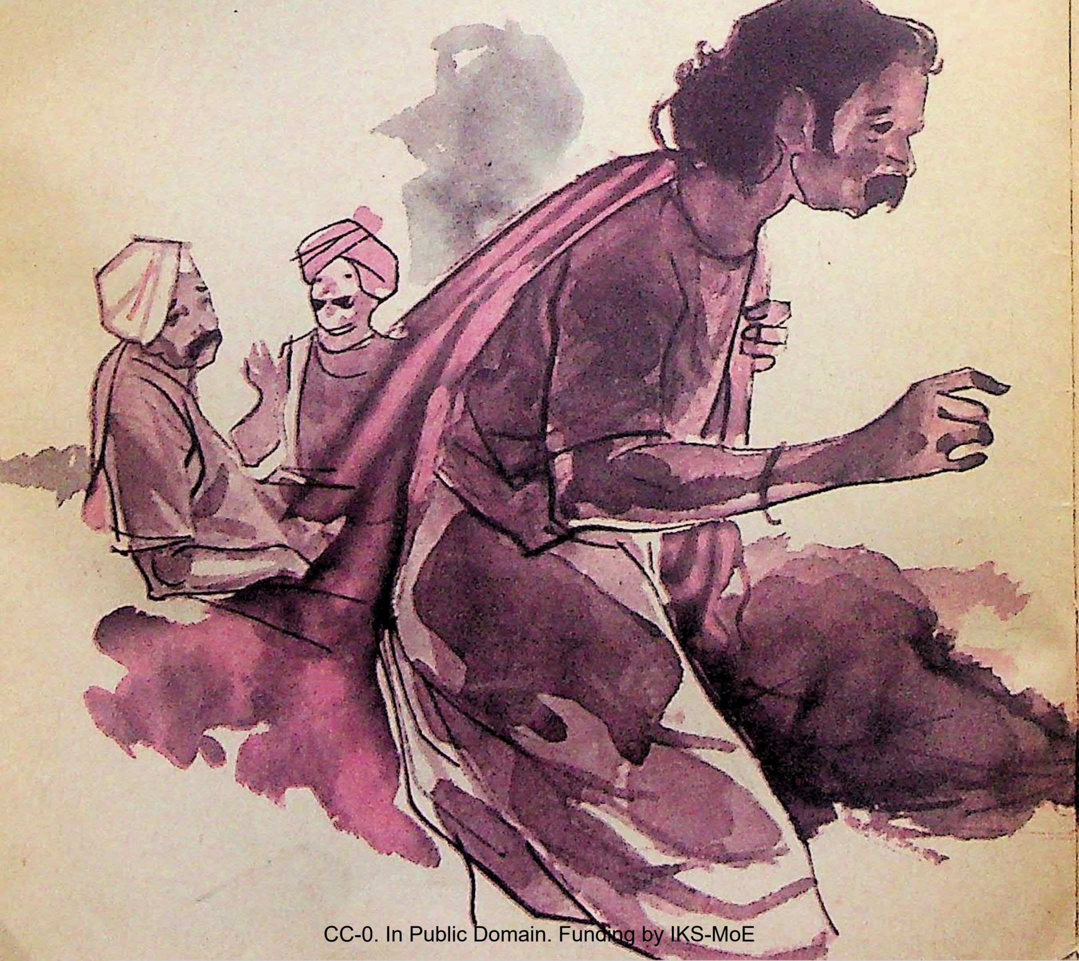
It was night. In the inn of a tiny hamlet in the Punjab two men were engrossed in discussion. One was an impressive looking man of noble bearing—it seemed as if a halo shone around his head. The other was well-built with an earnest expression on his face. He looked at the man seated opposite with the devotion due to a Guru.



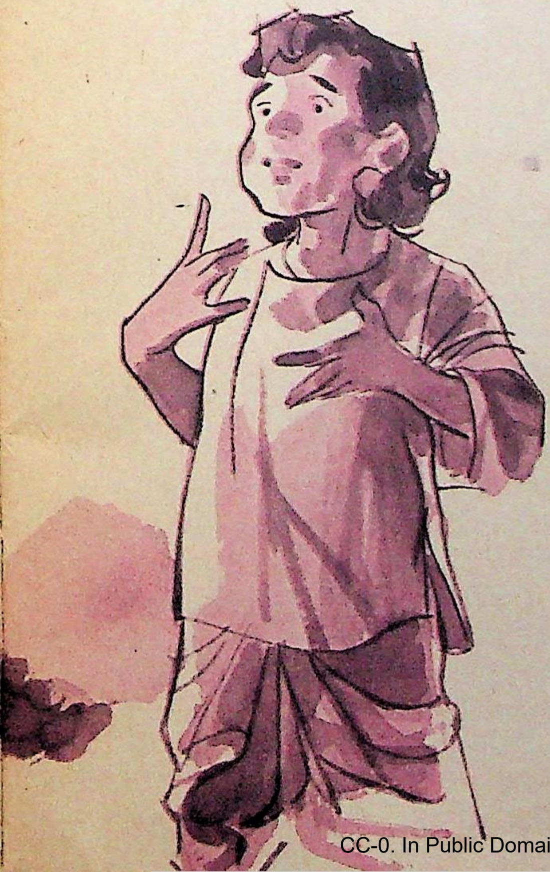
He was recounting the day's happenings. "I have never been to a more hospitable town," he said. "What a welcome. Everyone was so kind and gave generously of everything they had—flour, milk, clothes. . .everything."

The Guru stroked his beard and said with a smile, "May God destroy this village!"

"Destroy the village! But why ?" cried the other.



"Why such a calamity for such good people ? At the last village where everyone turned on us, mocked and insulted us and sent us away empty-handed you said, 'May God preserve this village!' I really cannot understand you!" Mardana shook his head in bewilderment.



The Guru smiled gently. "Isn't it best that a village full of wicked people should remain intact so that their wicked ways and meanness does not spread their evil contagion to others. And a village full of good people should be swiftly uprooted so that its people are forced to move out and live elsewhere. By their example they will teach others and thus spread goodness and happiness all around."

Mardana was satisfied. Once again he had seen the wisdom of his Guru's words. This great Guru was the founder of the Sikh religion and Mardana was his faithful companion who served him day and night.

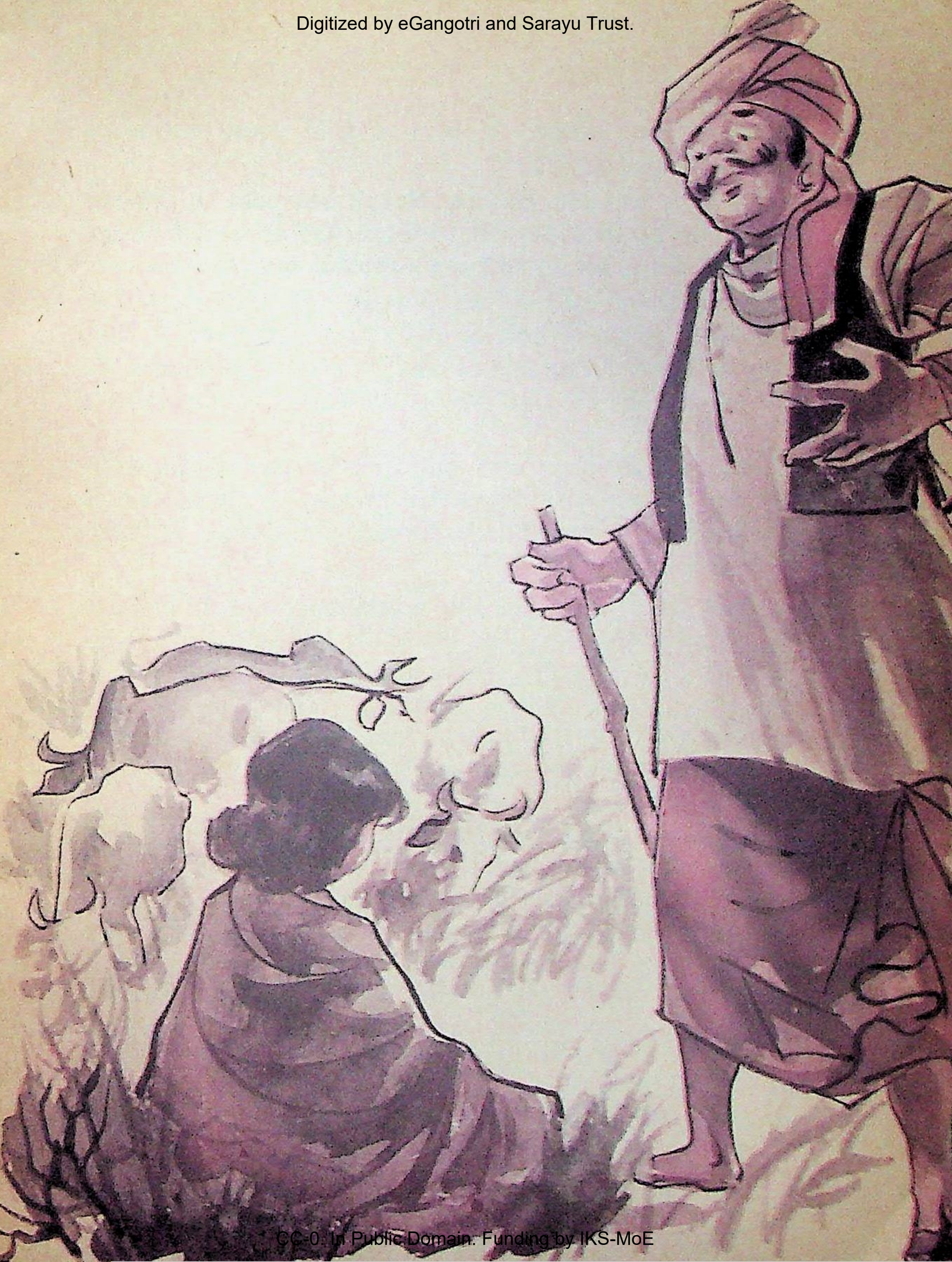
In the fifteenth century there was widespread chaos in the Punjab. Attracted by tales of India's riches hordes of invaders poured in through the Khyber Pass. They looted and plundered everything in sight and laid waste the countryside. There was devastation everywhere. In their terror the people forgot their loyalty to their country and the worship of their gods.

Nanak was born in this dark age. And in these troubled time he inspired the people with a new confidence and purpose. He established a new religion which was to have a profund and everlasting impact on India.

Nanak was born on April 15, 1469 in Talwandi, a small town in the Punjab. His father's name was Mehta Kalu and his mother's Tripta. They were Bedis, a sub-caste of Kshatriyas.

Talwandi was far away from the capital and the noise and bustle of big cities. The headman and the one who mattered most in Talwandi was Rai Bular, a Hindu who had converted to Islam. Rai Bular was a good man and he was kind to the peasants. Nanak's father Kalu worked under him.

As was customary among the Bedis, a day was fixed for Nanak's thread ceremony. But when the pundit came to put the thread around him, Nanak asked, "Why are you tying this string round my neck ? What is so special about it ? I could lose it or break it. It can get soiled or catch fire. Surely it is more important to speak the truth, be good and kind to people, to control one's evil thoughts rather than wear a piece of string round your neck."



People were amazed to hear a child speak words of wisdom beyond his years.

When he was old enough Nanak was sent to school. He also went to a Maulvi to learn Arabic and Persian. But Nanak was for more knowledgeable than his teachers.

Nanak's real teacher was Nature. He often went off alone into the forest and sat there lost in thought. Sometimes he was so overcome by what he saw of the marvels of God's creations that he would burst into singing praises of the Maker.

Nanak was often sent out to take the buffaloes to pasture. He enjoyed doing this because while the cattle were grazing, he could be by himself and devote the time to meditation.

Once his cattle strayed onto a neighbouring field and ate up the standing crop. The owner of the field drove them out with great difficulty. He went in search of their master. He found Nanak lost in thought, his eyes closed. He dragged Nanak to Rai Bular. When Mehta Kalu heard of the incident he too was very angry with his son and he asked Rai Bular to punish Nanak.

Rai Bular knew that Nanak was no ordinary mortal. He asked his men to go and see how much damage had been done and assess the compensation. When the men went to the field they found no trace of damage—the crop were as green and lush as ever. Everyone was convinced that Nanak was blessed by God with miraculous powers.

Sometime later Nanak was sent to Sultanpur to live with his sister and her husband. He was put in charge of a grain store. Nanak gave whatever he could to the hungry and the poor but there was never any shortage in the stock.

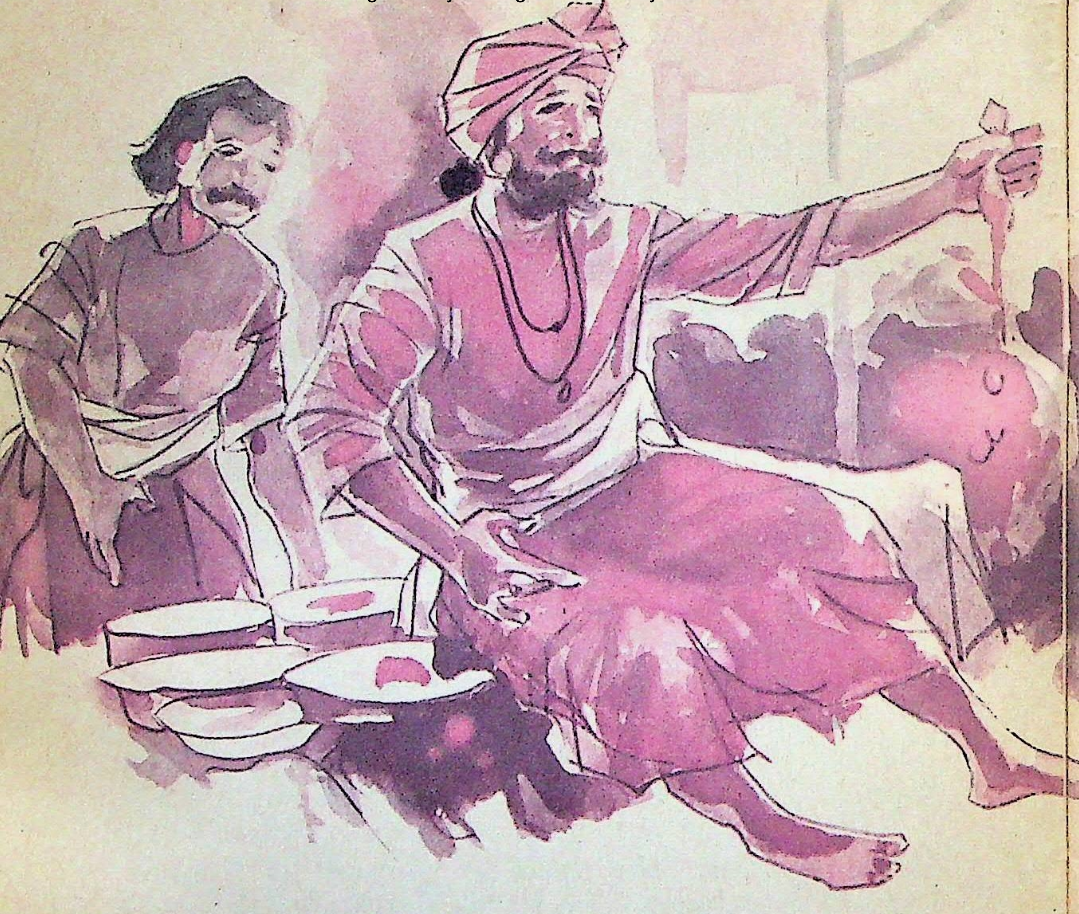
In due course Nanak was married. His wife bore him two sons.

Nanak was not destined to stay at home. His mind was not at peace. He felt that he had a special mission to fulfil. He had not been sent to the earth to eat and sleep and raise a family. He had to show the people the right path and take them from darkness into light.

One day when Nanak had gone to the river to bathe he disappeared. The people thought he had been drowned. They searched everywhere but could find no trace of him. On the third day he emerged from the stream. All he said was, "There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim. All are the children of God." Thereafter he resolved to bring both the communities to the right path.

Nanak was very troubled to see that the people had strayed from the path of righteousness. They had forgotten God and true religion. Like a rudderless ship they were floundering on the seas of falsehood. They needed someone to guide them and ferry them across the turbulent waters of life. Otherwise they would be drowned in delusion. These thoughts preoccupied Nanak, finally one day he took his disciple Mardana and set off to spread his ideas far and wide.

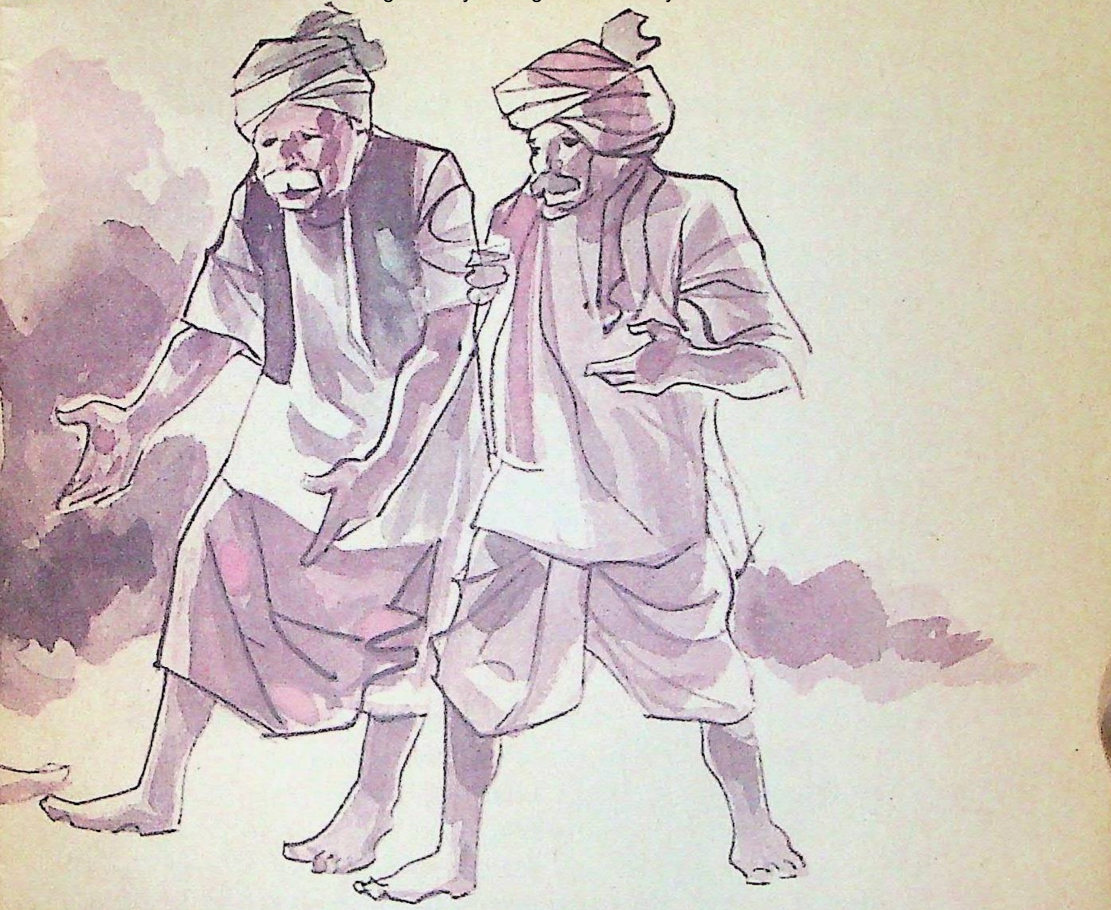
Once a Kazi invited Nanak to join him and the local Nawab at Prayers in the mosque. Nanak accepted the invitation but took his place some distance removed from the two men. When the prayers were over the Kazi turned to Nanak and said, "Did you see this non-believer? He did not join us but watched us from a distance. He has insulted our religion. He should be punished.



Nanak smiled and replied, "But Kazi Sahib, you were only pretending to pray. You may have been reciting *suras* from the *Koran* but your thoughts were elsewhere. Weren't you thinking about your mare which has just foaled ? Nawab Sahib's thoughts were also not about God but why the men he had sent to Kabul to buy horses had not returned. I have little use for such prayers."

Both the Kazi and the Nawab were stunned. How could Nanak have known about their inner thoughts?

Nanak was specially concerned about the poor and destitute. He became their champion. Once a carpenter Bhai Lalo invited Nanak to a meal. Nanak enjoyed the



meal very much although Lalo had only offered him simple coarse bread. Just then the village headman Malik Bhago sent word inviting Nanak to his house. It was considered a great honour to be asked to dine with a man as rich and powerful as Malik Bhago. But Nanak did not go. Bhago took offence and said angrily to Nanak, "You eat the coarse bread of a poor, low caste carpenter and yet you insult me by refusing to come to my feast.

Nanak replied, "This poor man's bread is made of milk while yours in made of blood. His bread was earned by honest labour; he sweated and toiled for it. Yours is made of exploited labour and cheating the poor." To prove his point Nanak took the rich Malik Bhago's bread in one hand and the poor carpenter's bread in the other. He squeezed both the loaves. From the rich man's loaf fell drops of blood; from the poor man's drops of milk. Malik Bhago hung his head in shame. There are many stories like this about Nanak.

During his travels Nanak once went to Hardwar. There on the banks of the river Ganga people were making offerings to their ancestors by throwing water towards the sun. Nanak watched them for some time, then taking some water in his hands began to throw it in the opposite direction. The people began to laugh at him. Nanak asked them, "Why are you laughing at me ? If the water you are throwing can reach your ancestors in heaven, surely my palmfuls can reach my fields in the Punjab which are so much nearer !"

In this way Nanak showed the people the meaninglessness of ritual which had no relevance to religion.

In those days there was a famous robber called Sajjan. He was as cunning as he was cruel. He built a temple full of gods and goddesses for the Hindus and a mosque for the Muslims. "This will lure both Hindus and Muslims to my house," he said to himself, "and when they are asleep at night I'll steal their money and jewels and then kill them."

One day Nanak was passing near by. Sajjan invited him home and spread out a great feast before him. But all the time he was thinking, "This man looks very happy. He must be very rich. Tonight I will rob him and then murder him. No one will know anything about it."

After the meal Sajjan urged Nanak to go to bed. But Nanak said, "Herons and birds of prey are found in holy places yet they eat living things and their hearts are evil."

Sajjan realised that Nanak was referring to him. "I am like the birds Nanak is speaking of. Although I do not eat people I kill them."

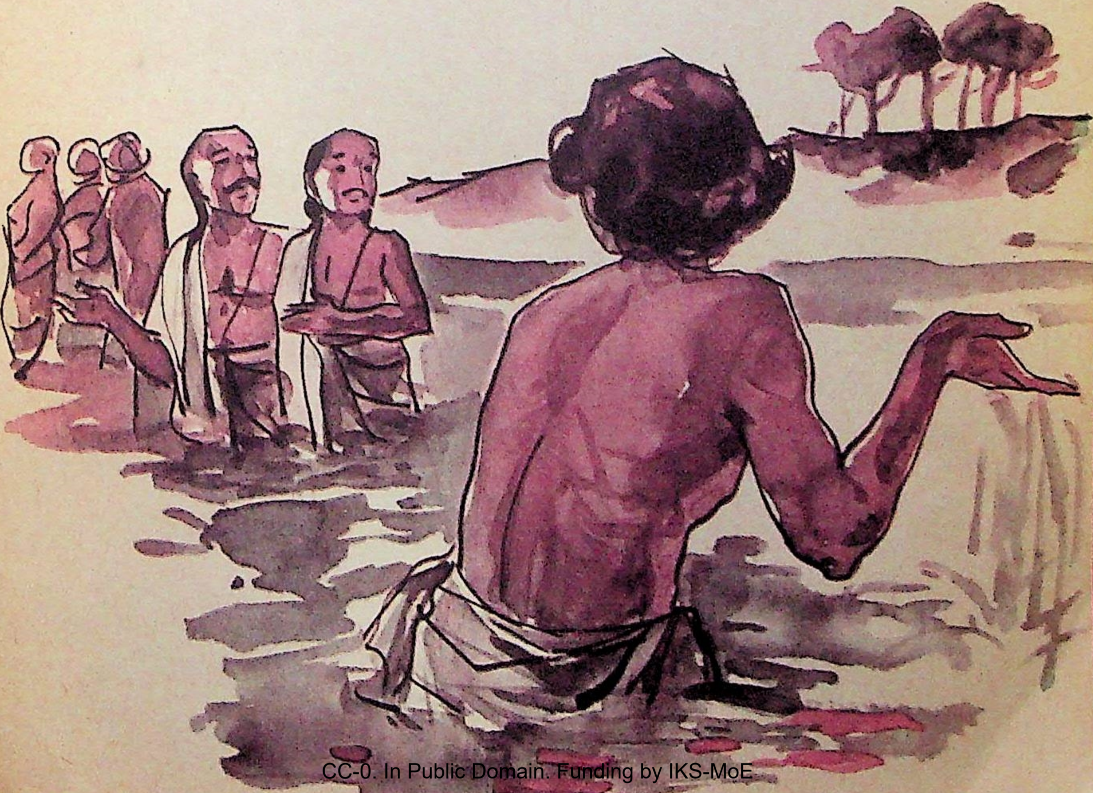
He fell down at Nanak's feet and asked his forgivenness.

Nanak said, "Sajjan, only God can forgive you. And God only forgives those who admit their sins openly and repair the wrongs they have done. Tell me how many people have you robbed and killed ?"

Sajjan hung his head in shame. "I have murdered and robbed many hundreds of men, women and children. How can I possibly obtain God's forgiveness ?

"Give away all you have to the poor," Nanak said.

Sajjan did as Nanak had asked and became his follower. The first Sikh temple in India was built by Sajjan the



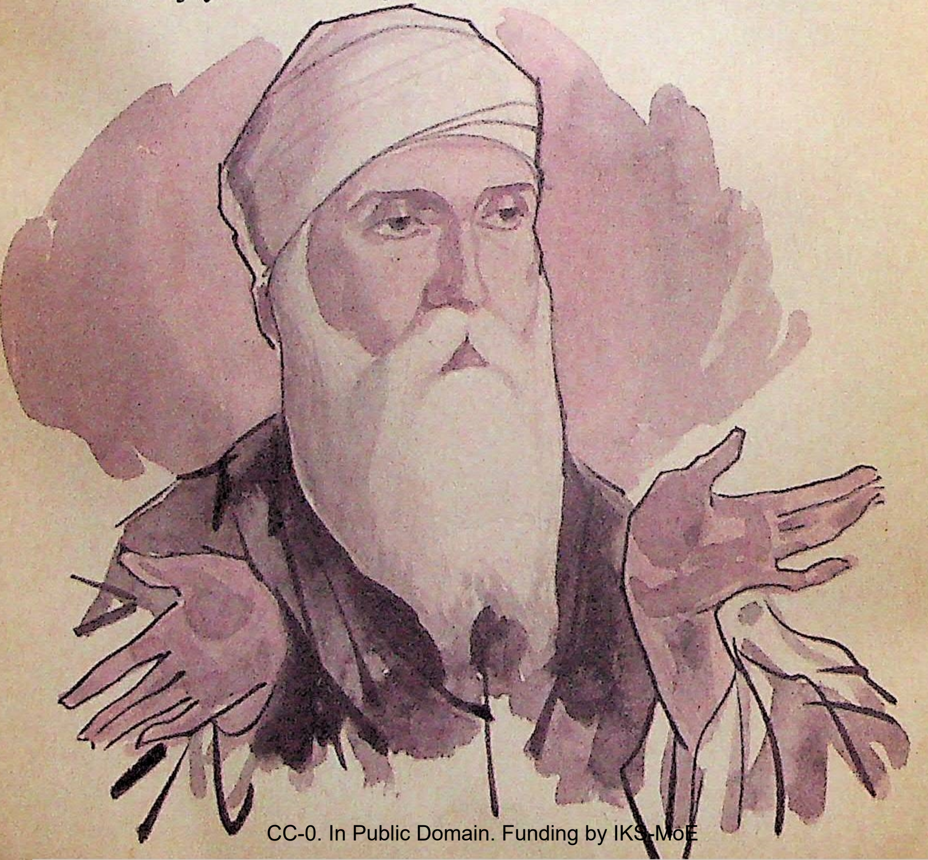
robber, in gratitude to Nanak who had changed his way of life.

Like other saints Nanak was against the caste system. He was also against meaningless ritual and superstitions. He taught three main principles—to do one's duty, to respect oneself and others and to pray to one God.

Throughout his life Nanak fought against falsehood and superstition, he taught the people the right path and helped the poor and needy.

In the month of *Ashwin* in 1531 Nanak reached Kartarpur during his travels. He asked one of his disciples Angad who had served him faithfully for many years to take over his work and carry on his mission.

On Vijayadashmi day 1539 Nanak passed away.



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BASAVESWAR

Sometime during the 12th century in the Bijapur district of Karnataka there was a village called Bagevadi. In this village there lived a Brahmin called Mandigaye Madiraja. About 500 Brahmin families lived in this village along with people belonging to other castes. The village was an *agrahara* which had been given as a gift to the Brahmins by the king. This is why the Brahmins were very powerful and influential in the life of the community. Madiraja was a distinguished man and was highly respected by the people of the village.

His wife's name was Madambe. They were a pious and kind couple. But inspite of all their wealth and prestige they were unhappy because they had no children. Finally they begged the priests and asked them for help.

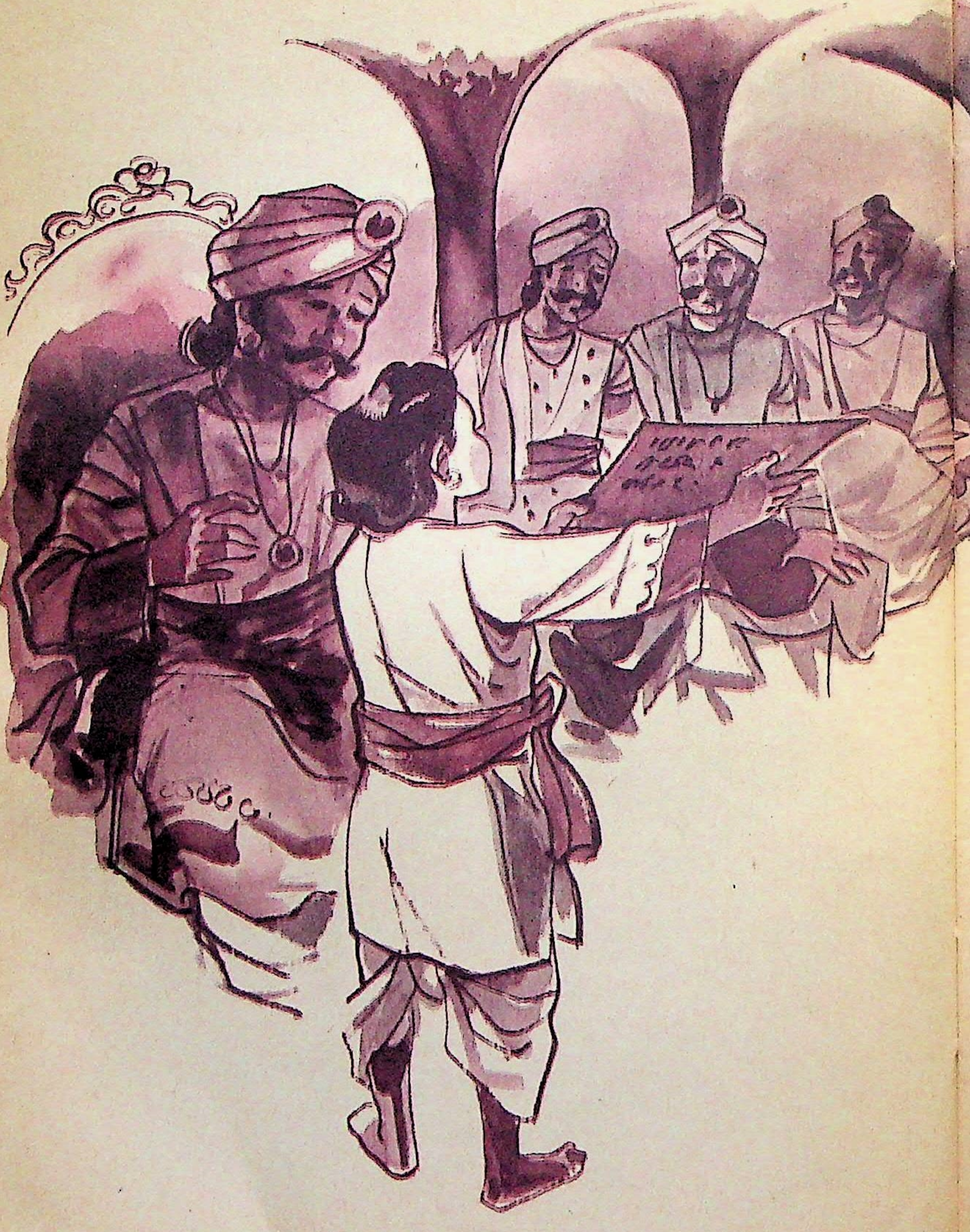
"Observe the Vrishabh fast and pray to Shivas mount Nandi", they were told.

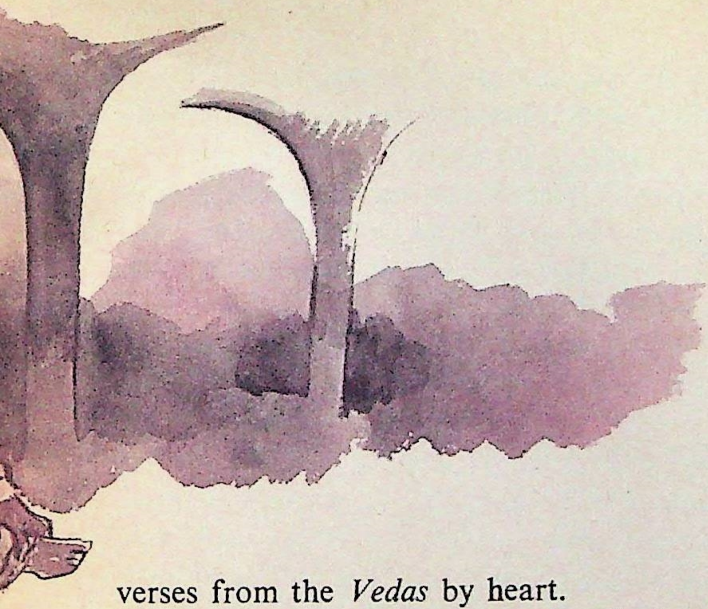
Madambe fasted and prayed with all her heart. Secretly she decided that if she had a son she would call him Basav. (Basav in Kannada means bull).

At last her prayers were answered and a beautiful son was born to them.

Basav seemed gifted with extraordinary intelligence. His parents adored him and he was the favourite of the entire village.

His father was a learned man. He wanted his son to be instructed in the *Vedas* and in all the branches of classical learning. He planned his son's education with great enthusiasm. Basav learnt fast. Soon he could recite





verses from the *Vedas* by heart.

But even as a boy Basav hated the hypocrisy of the Brahmins.

They worshipped snakes but when a snake entered the house they killed it.

Fire was considered sacred but when a fire broke out they extinguished it. He hated the sacrifice of animals during religious ceremonies. He could not bear to hear the cries of the animal before it was killed. All this had a profound effect on Basav's mind. And questions of all kinds began to worry him.

One day when Basav was eight year's old he saw signs of great festivity in the village.

Houses were being decorated. Garlands of fresh mango leaves were hung across doorways. Women drew delicate patterns of *rangoli*. Strains of melody could be heard throughout the village as the *shehnais* began to play.

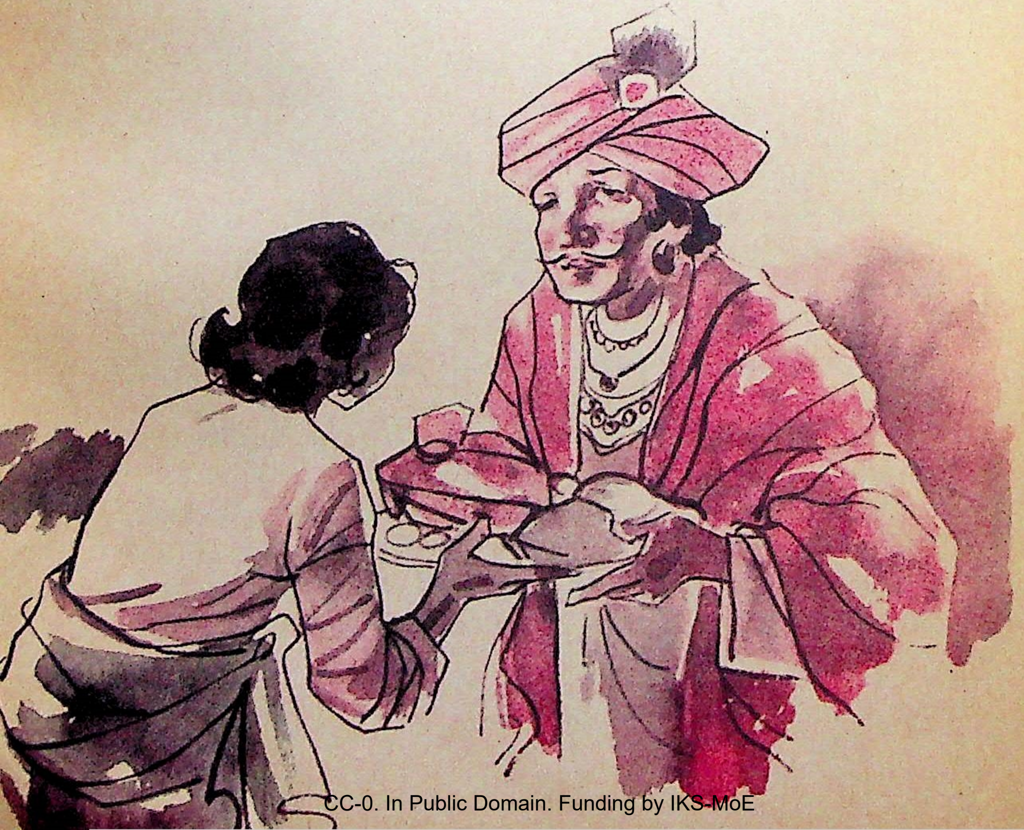
People dressed in rich colourful clothes moved about happily. Basav asked his father what the celebrations were about.

"Don't you know?" His father asked with a laugh, Silly boy this is the day of your *Yagnopavit* ceremony when the Brahmins will invest you with the sacred thread."

"What is the sacred thread?"

"When Brahmin and Kshatriya boys are old enough to be instructed in the religious texts and begin their formal education they are invested with the sacred thread."

"But why only Brahmin and Kshatriyas, why don't all boys wear it ?"



"People from the lower castes do not wear it," his father said a little impatiently. "Now come with me."

"But if I am a Brahmin by birth why do I need to wear a sacred thread to prove it?"

Basav's father tried his best to persuade him but Basav refused. "I will not go. I do not want to wear the thread and I will not go through any ceremony which makes distinctions between people simply because they belong to different castes. I will not go. If you insist I will leave home and go away."

The people were amazed to hear these words from such a young boy. Madiraja was distressed. He insisted that Basav receive the sacred thread. It was not merely a question of custom and tradition but also of his prestige.

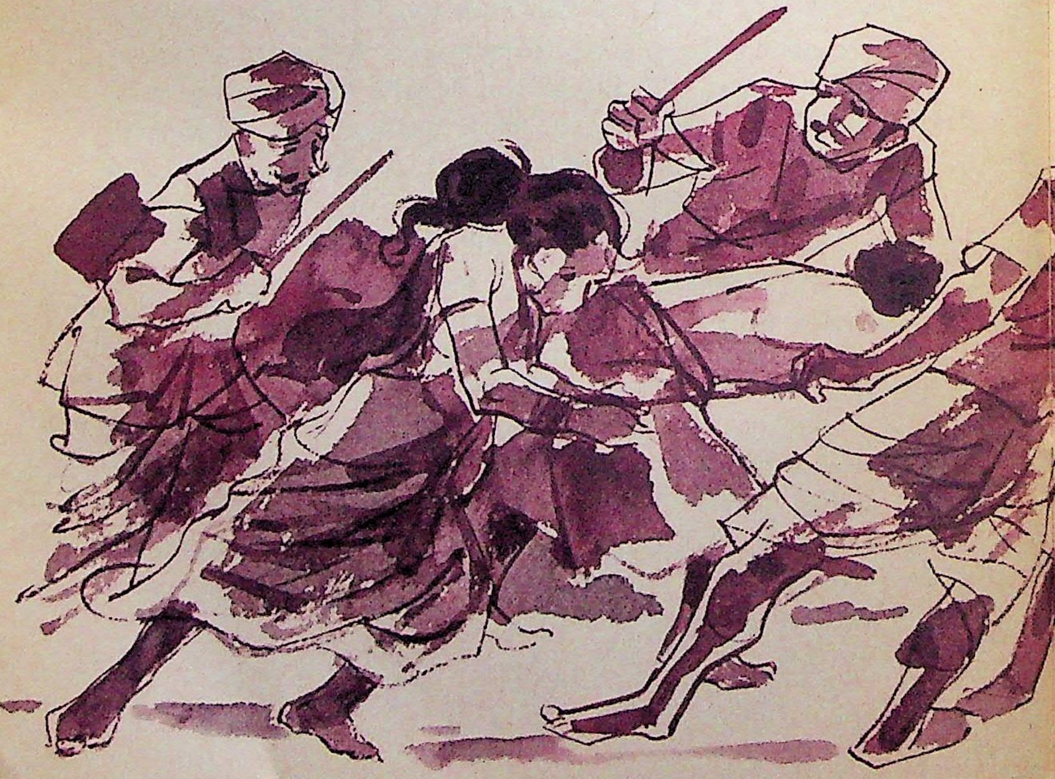
He asked the priests to persuade Basav, if necessary to use pressure. Madambe too begged her son to give in. At last Basav agreed. He went through the *Yagnopavit* even though his heart was not in it. After this he was accepted by the *guru* as a pupil and his formal instruction began. Madiraja and Madambe were relieved.

Basav studied the *Vedas*, grammar, prosody, music, literature, philosophy and several other subjects. He was very intelligent and mastered whatever he was taught rapidly. But he hated the method of teaching where the pupil simply memorised everything parrot-like without absorbing the true meaning of the subject.

As he grew older he grew more and more conscious of the inequalities and injustices in society. The differences between him and the priests grew sharper day by day. He could bear it no longer.

Meanwhile his parents died. After this the people of the village opposed him openly. He decided to leave the village. He went to a place called Kudal Sangam situated at the confluence of the river Krishna and Malprabha. This is also in the district of Bijapur. Where the two rivers meet, there is a temple called the *Sangameswar Mandir* Sangameswar was Basav's personal diety and Basav spent several years here serving and worshipping him.

But as time passed Basav noticed that even this serene and sacred spot was marred by distinctions of caste and creed. People here were really no different from those in Bagevadi. Inspite of this he felt he would find spiritual enlightenment here. He felt inspired to go and communicate

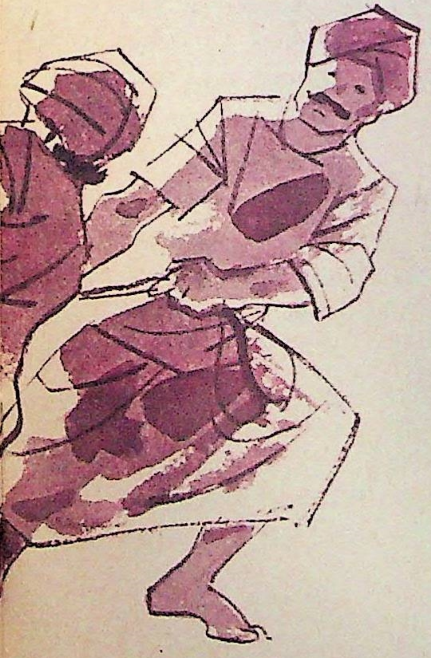


his message to the world outside and to work for the salvation of people. To spread his philosophy among people he would have to work and earn money and find dedicated and zealous followers to help him.

Basav was very good at mathematics. He wondered whether he could work at Raja Bijjal's court in the treasury. It is said that he went to Raja Bijjal's treasury, and waited outside for the chief of the treasury to come, so that he could ask him for a job. Just then Sidhadandnath, the king's chief treasurer arrived and began checking the accounts. Basav who was standing near him was looking at the register very attentively. He at once noticed an error which would have caused a heavy loss to the state. When he pointed out the mistake Sidhadandnath almost leapt with joy.

He immediately took Basav to Raja Bijjal and told him about Basav's brilliance and that they could not hope to find a better man for the treasury. Basav was appointed. It is said that Sidhadandnath and Basav were related to each other. Basav married both Sidhadandnath's daughters, Ganga Devi and Maya Devi.

Basav respected all other faiths although himself a Shaivite. After Sidhadandnath he became the chief treasurer. Along with his official



duties he continued to work for the propagation of his faith. Raja Bijjal trusted him completely and did not interfere with his religious work.

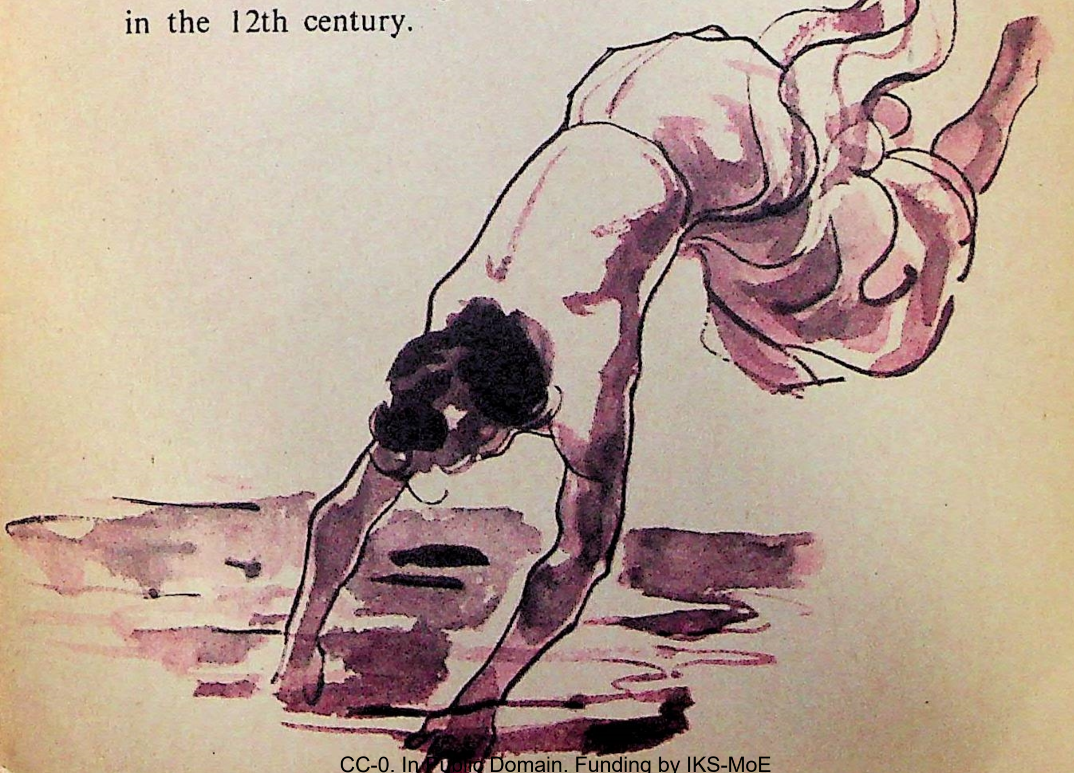
Before taking charge as chief of the treasury Basav had told the king, "I am a devotee of Shiva, all the Shaivaites in the country will come to me, I shall show them all respect and honour and offer them hospitality. It is possible that some people might try and prejudice you against me and say that I am wasting the money of the royal treasury on my disciples." But the Raja assured him that he had complete faith in him, "I shall not be influenced by anybody."

Basav spent his own earnings to look after his followers. His house was always full of his disciples. Taking advantage of the situation, people who were jealous of him complained to the king that Basav was squandering the wealth of the treasury for spreading his faith. When the Raja investigated this and looked into the accounts of the treasury he found that the money had not diminished at all, in fact it was more than it had been to start with.

Among Basav's followers, there was one Brahmin and one untouchable. The Brahmin and the Shudra wanted their son and daughter to get married. Basav was happy when he came to know of this and blessed the marriage. But the people could never accept the fact that a brahmin boy should marry an untouchable girl. They complained bitterly to the Raja. The Raja at once ordered that the marriage be stopped. However, inspite of the king's command the marriage was performed. Because they had dared to disobey a royal command, the king ordered that the couples eyes should be drawn out.

Basaveswar was now an important religious leader and sermons were delivered and discussions and discourse on serious religions issues held in his house. His popularity and his influence were resented by his opponents. They complained and carried malicious stories about him to the Raja. Relations between Basav and the Raja were rather strained by now. Basav decided to leave the king's service and practice his faith at Kudal Sangam. Here in 1167-68 he died.

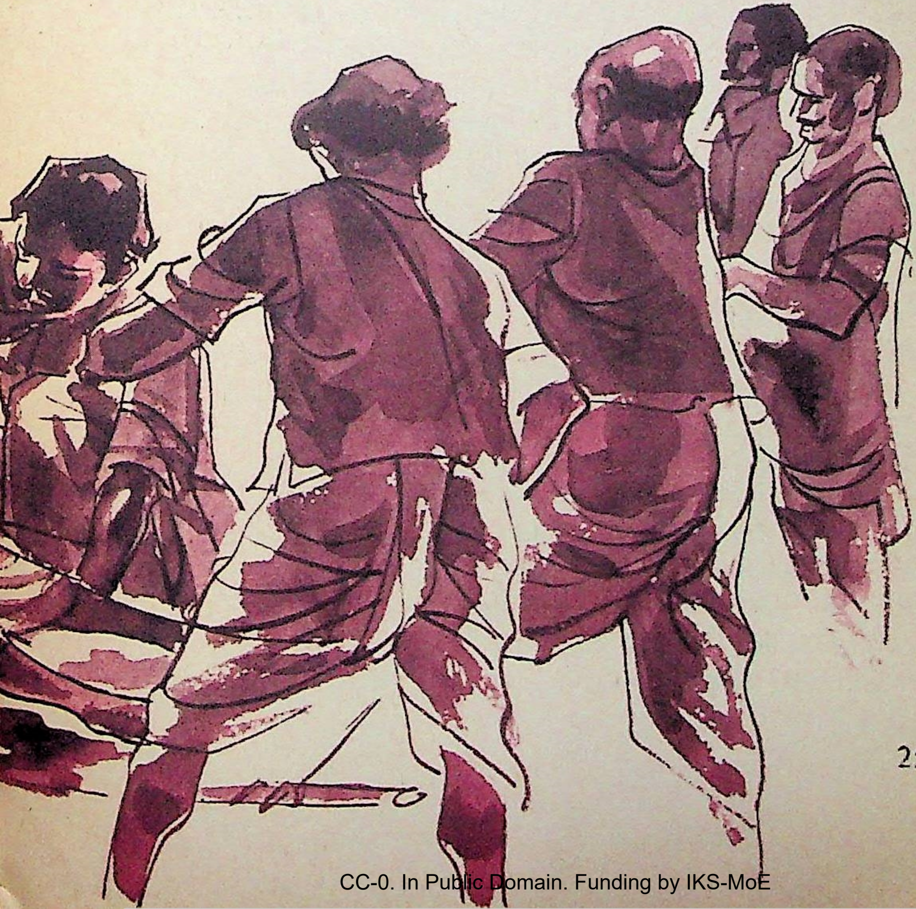
Along with his work for the *Veer Shaiva* sect Basav worked for many years to improve the status of women. To convey his message to the common man Basav and his followers wrote poems in simple Kannada. It is said that once when Mahatma Gandhi was addressing a Congress meeting at Belgaum he said that the work he was doing in India now was begun by Basaveswar in Karnataka in the 12th century.



CHAKRADHAR

Although Swami Chakradhar was born in Gujarat, he spent most of his life in Maharashtra. He was given the name Harpal Dev at birth but was later called Chakradhar. He belonged to a well-known, prosperous family of Gujarat and his father was connected with the ruling family.

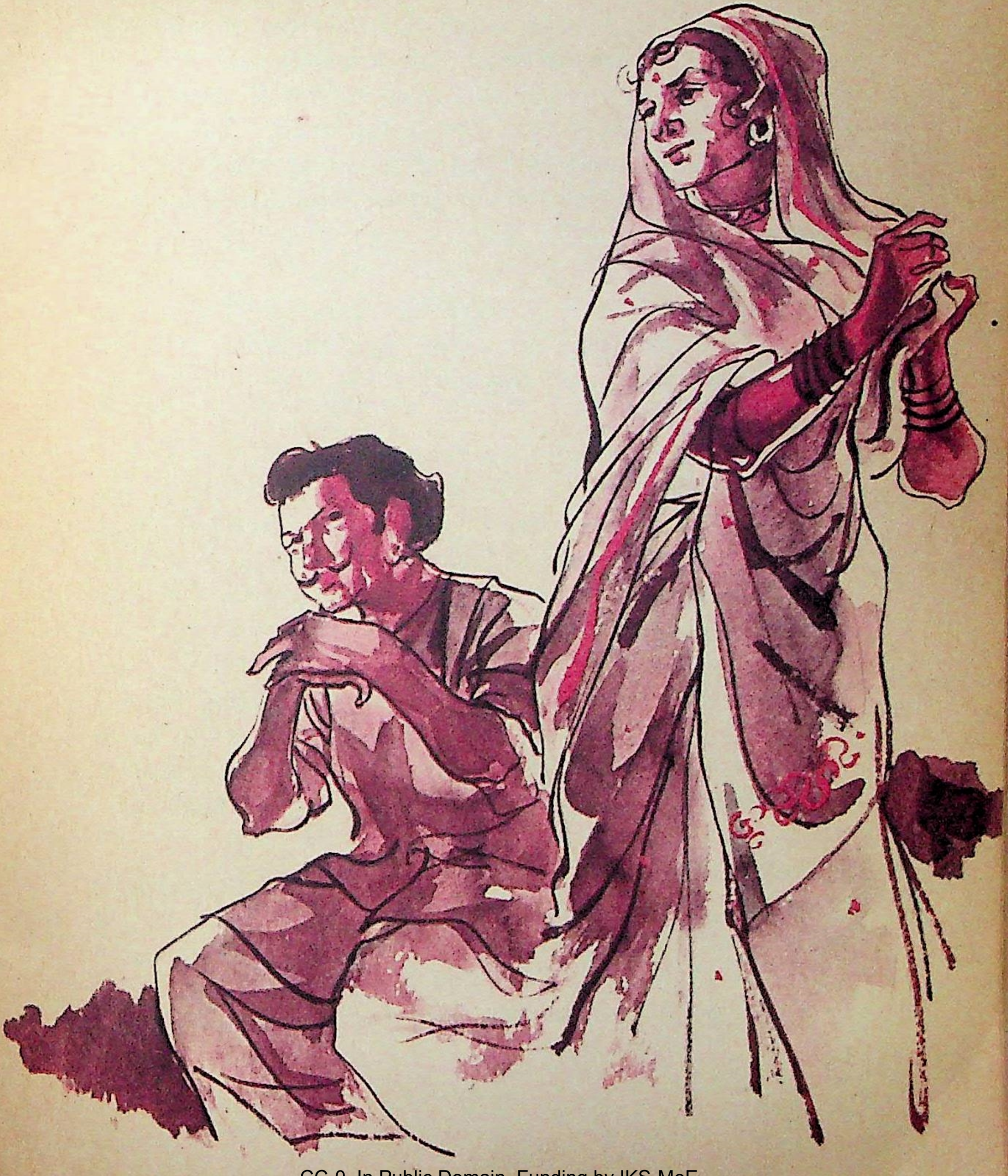
When Harpal Dev was twenty-five years old the Raja of Devagiri attacked Gujarat. The valiant prince fought fiercely and drove his enemies back to Verul. But in the midst of this great victory, tragedy struck. Harpal Dev suddenly fell ill. All attempts to save his life failed.



A strange story is told of what happened next. It is said that when Harpal Dev's body was being taken for cremation he sat up as if suddenly awakened from a deep sleep. The mourners could not believe their eyes. They had never heard of such a thing happening before. Was it a ghost or some evil spirit ? To test him they asked him all kinds of questions but Harpal Dev was able to answer them all and even mentioned some things which only he and his wife knew. Harpal Dev had come to life again and the people were overjoyed.

There was little doubt that such an unusual event could only be ascribed to the supernatural. In Gujarat people believe that in the Dwapar Age God reincarnated Himself in the person of Chandradev Raul. So people began saying that Chandradev Raul had been reborn in the body of Harpal Dev. Harpal Dev now became know as Chakradhar.

Chakradhar's early life was quite ordinary. He was fun-loving and gay and in due course he married a beautiful woman and led a happy and carefree life. But then he became addicted to gambling and gradually gambled away all he possessed. The more he lost the more recklessly he played in the hope that one day his luck would turn and he would recover everything. But he kept this a secret from his family. Ultimately, however, his creditors made his life impossible and he had no option But to tell his family. Chakradhar came home despondent and opening his keart to his wife begged her



to give him her jewellery and save his life. His wife was very shocked. She reprimanded him severely and refused to part with her ornaments. "This jewellery was given to me by my parents," she said firmly. "I will never part with it." These words utterly disillusioned Chakradhar. He had never dreamt that his wife would refuse to help him in need. He decided to leave home and go on a pilgrimage.

During his travels Chakradhar came to Warhad in eastern Maharashtra. Here he met a saint, Govind Prabhu and became his disciple.

With the blessings of his Guru, Chakradhar retired to the forest to meditate. It is said he meditated in the forest of Salbardi for twelve years. No one knows how he lived, what he did and how he spent his time. All we know is that after an absence of twelve years he was seen in the small town of Kanti.

After these long years of penance Chakradhar met a famous ascetic Udhalinath. Udhalinath wanted to teach him all he knew but discovered that Chakradhar was so enlightened that there was little he could teach him.

Now, Udhalinath was very impressed by Chakradhar's looks, for Chakradhar was very handsome. So he taught him the secret of eternal youth which it is believed, prevents one from ever growing old, and it is said that till the end of his days Chakradhar remained young and handsome.

Chakradhar believed that in order to win God one had to renounce worldly pleasures and lead a pious and austere life. He started a new sect called Mahanubhav sect which drew many followers.

In those days religion and learning were entirely in the hands of Brahmins and other high castes. The common people had to be satisfied with what crumbs of knowledge these arrogant castes were willing to share with them. Chakradhar raised his voice against this injustice. He always preached in Marathi, the language of the people, so that everyone could understand him. His sermons added greatly to Marathi language and literature.

Although disliked by the upper castes who did all they could to harass him, the common people came in their thousands to hear Chakradhar.

Chakradhar travelled far and wide preaching his religion. Gradually more and more people began to follow his teachings and the Mahanubhav sect grew in strength.

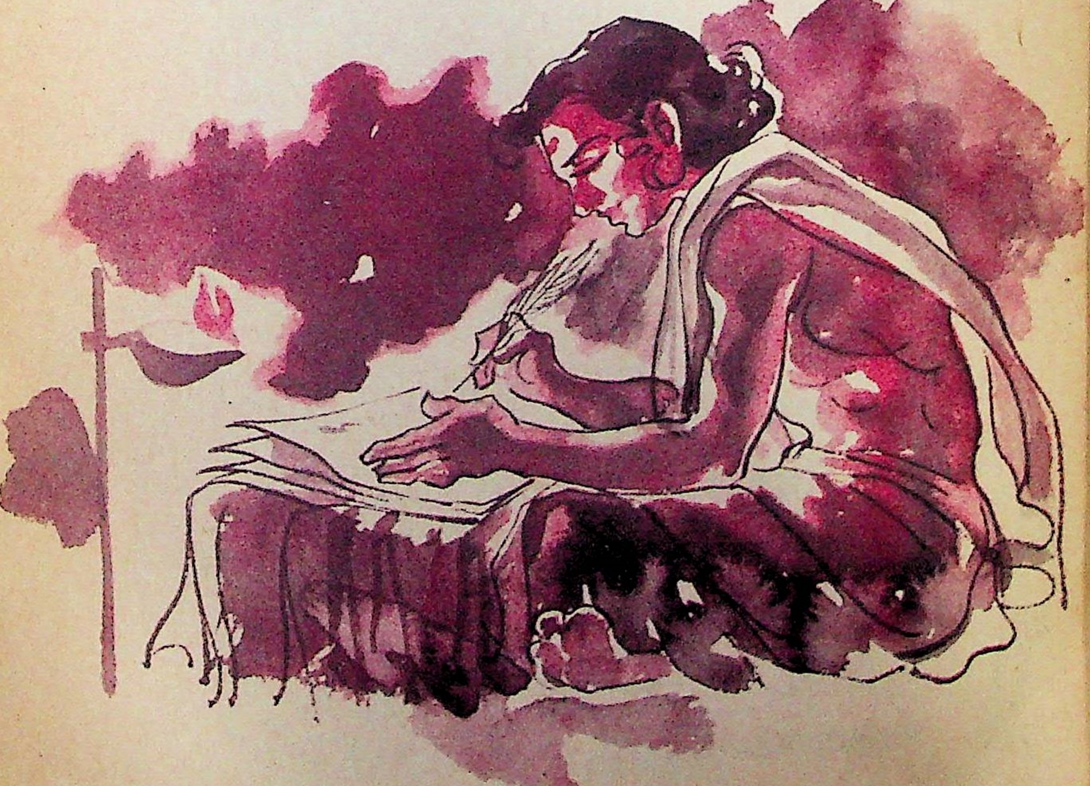
But, as always happens, as Swami Chakradhar's fame spread and the people flocked to him, the number of his enemies also increased. Yet Chakradhar bore malice towards no one neither did he wish anyone ill. He was a firm believer in non-violence both in thought and deed. Once someone secretly tried to poison him. Chakradhar suffered the ill-effects in silence and never reproached the person.

Chakradhar did not approve of many of the old customs and beliefs but it needed great courage to oppose people who were set in their ways and deaf to reason. Chakradhar was against caste distinction and was against the performance of sacrificial rites. He believed that God was everywhere and had no faith in those who said that it was not possible to attain salvation without going on pilgrimage.

Chakradhar had a disciple named Kakos. When a party of pilgrims decided to go to Dwarka, Kakos wanted to accompany them. Swami Chakradhar tried to dissuade him, explaining that God resided in everyone and that there was no need to go elsewhere to have a vision of Him. But Kakos was unconvinced and insisted on going. So Chakradhar decided to teach him a lesson. As Kakos sat, eyes closed, in deep meditation, he saw the city of Dwarka in front of him. The King's messengers took him to a grand palace. When he entered he saw to his extreme joy God Himself sitting on a throne. Slowly, however, in the place of Lord Krishna his own Guru, Swami Chakradar appeared. Kakos at once realised that God was close at hand in the form of his Guru. There was no need to suffer hardships and undertake long journeys in search of God.

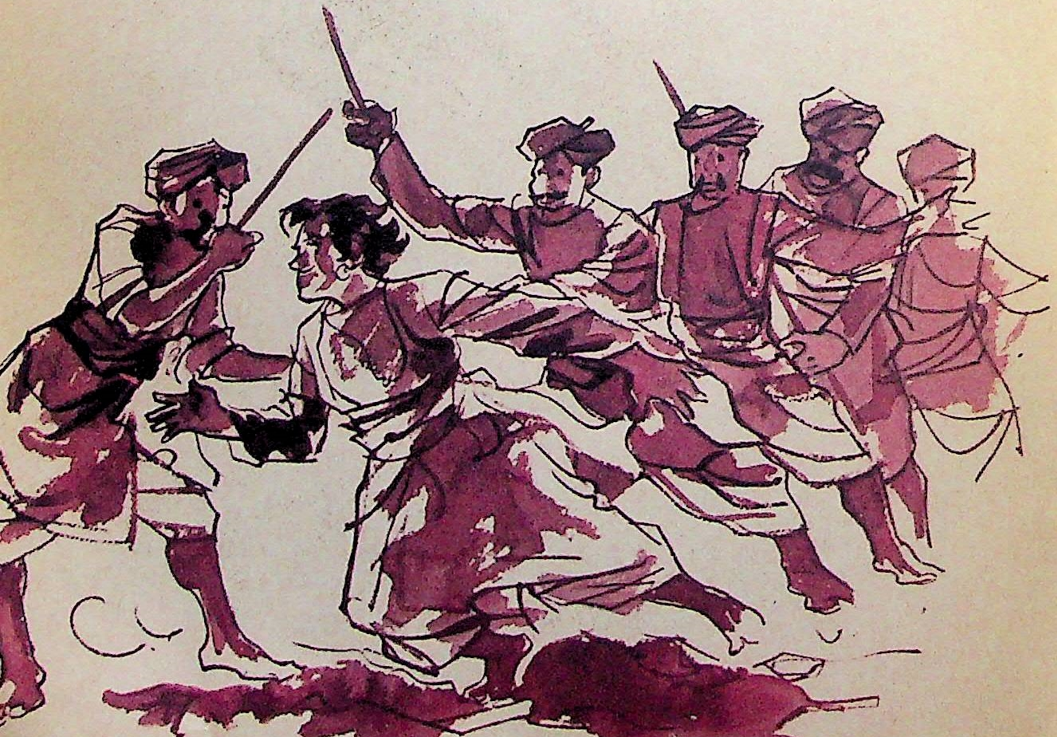
In this way and by setting an example himself, Chakradhar taught the people that religion did not depend on meaningless rituals and customs. But this angered the orthodox who became his sworn enemies. They poisoned the King's mind against Chakradhar and the State authorities too began to persecute and harass him.

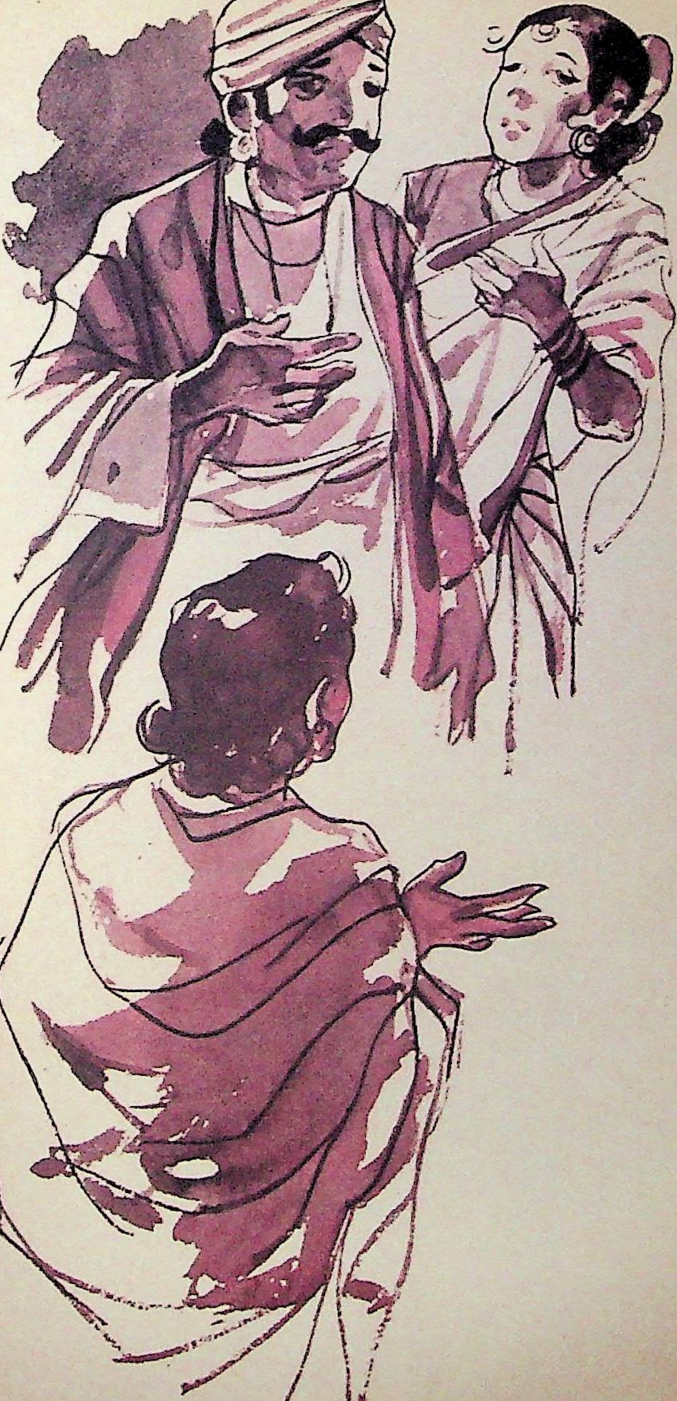
The orthodox Brahmins assembled in the Mudhaditya temple. Summoning Swami Chakradhar, they began to question him. But this was hardly a fair trail. What justice could the saintly Chakradhar expect from such evil-minden inquisitors? After the mock trial, sentence was passed that Chakradhar's nose and ears be cut off. The sentence was promptly carried out.



Swami Chakradhar was locked up for three days. But when he emerged on the fourth day, behold what a miracle! His face was as handsome as before. He did not even have a scar! His disciples were overjoyed and thousands of voices were raised in jubilation. But his enemies' rage knew no bounds. They decided that to get rid of him they needed royal help.

Chakradhar was dragged out of his hermitage. His disciple Nagdev tried to save him but was beaten off with sticks. And with one stroke the saintly Chakradhar's head was cut off. This happened near the banks of a river. A sadhu who was watching, witnessed another miracle. Slowly Chakradhar's severed head began to move and joined his body. Chakradhar came back to life.





But Chakaradhar did not want to live among the people any more. He had tried to show them the light of knowledge but they chose to live in the darkness of ignorance. Chakradhar set off for the Himalayas. It is believed that he is there still looking down with kindness at the sorrows of the world and praying for the destruction of sin.

Chakradhar may well be called the Gandhi of the thirteenth century. He was born in Gujarat, worked in Maharashtra and preached non-violence and, like Gandhi, he met his end at the hands of people opposed to enlightenment.

EKNATH

Eknath's daily chores are done by Madhav—he prepares the sandalwood paste, he fills the pitchers with water from Ganga. So goes a popular couplet.

The Eknath to whom the couplet refers was born in 1528 in Paithan. He was the grandson of the famous saint Bhanudas. It is said that when the idol of Vithal was uprooted and taken to Karnataka, Bhanudas, by his spiritual powers brought it back to Pandharpur.

The family called Eknath *Ekya*, meaning one because he was the only boy in Bhanudas' family.

Eknath was a very clever child. He memorised Sanskrit *slokas* and *mantras* very quickly. When he was six years old he was invested with the sacred thread.

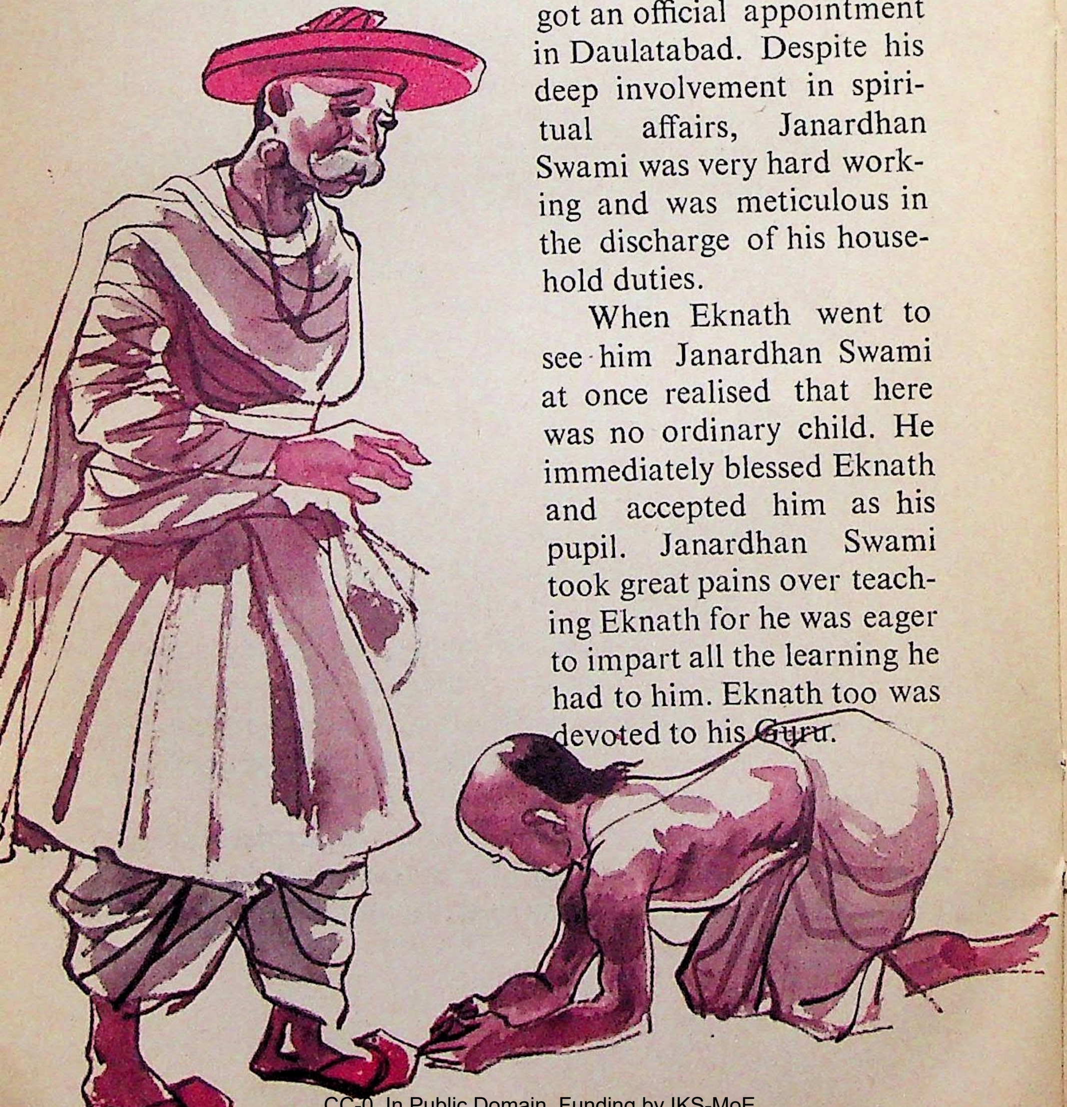
Even as a child, Eknath worshipped God with great devotion. He regarded every little round stone as an image of God, adorned it with flowers and worshipped it. He would pick up a ladle from the kitchen and walking around with it on his shoulder, say it was his veena. He would sing couplets in his babyish voice and having heard a hymn once was able to repeat it without a single mistake. He would make little flags from pieces of cloth and flaunting them on his shoulder say he was on his way to Pandharpur. Such were the unusual games little Eknath played.

Seeing where Eknath's interests lay his father decided to send him to a well-known Guru for instruction. Fortunately he was able to find just the man he was looking for.

His name was Janardhan Swami.

Janardhan Swami belonged to a family of priests of Chalisgaon. He was a wise statesman who later got an official appointment in Daulatabad. Despite his deep involvement in spiritual affairs, Janardhan Swami was very hard working and was meticulous in the discharge of his household duties.

When Eknath went to see him Janardhan Swami at once realised that here was no ordinary child. He immediately blessed Eknath and accepted him as his pupil. Janardhan Swami took great pains over teaching Eknath for he was eager to impart all the learning he had to him. Eknath too was devoted to his Guru.



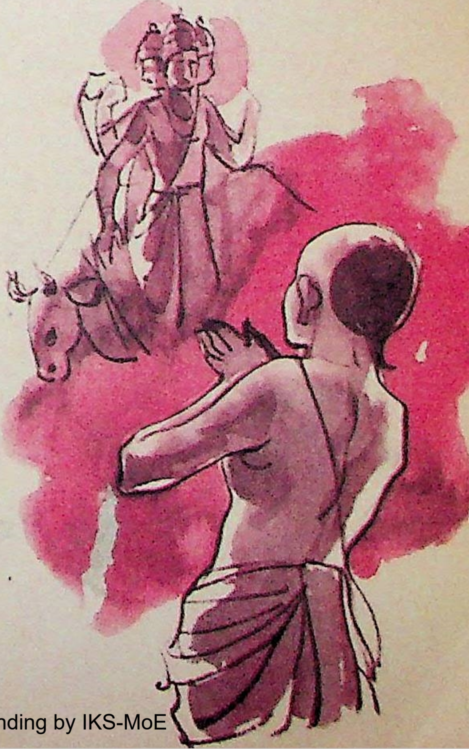
Once, at the hour of midnight, Janardhan Swami woke and saw Eknath frantically looking for something. He had all the account books open in front of him. Suddenly Eknath's face lit up with a smile and he began to clap his hands with joy.

"What is the matter?" The Guru asked. "What are you doing at this hour? Why aren't you asleep?"

"I was short of one pice in the tally," Eknath replied. "This was worrying me. It has taken me a long time to discover the error in my accounting. That is why I am so pleased with myself."

Janardhan Swami smiled and said, "If you concentrate on God as much as you did on your accounts, you will find greater joy."

Eknath was the personification of peace. He had won a total victory over anger. Once, after he had just bathed in the Ganga, a man spat on him. Without saying a word Eknath went back to the river and bathed again. But no sooner had he come out of the water than the same man spat on him a second time. Eknath washed himself again. This happened a hundred and eight times. Eknath did not loose his temper. Ultimately the man fell at Eknath's feet



and said, "Lord, I had heard great praise of you. Today I have seen your greatness with my own eyes. Now I will follow you everywhere.

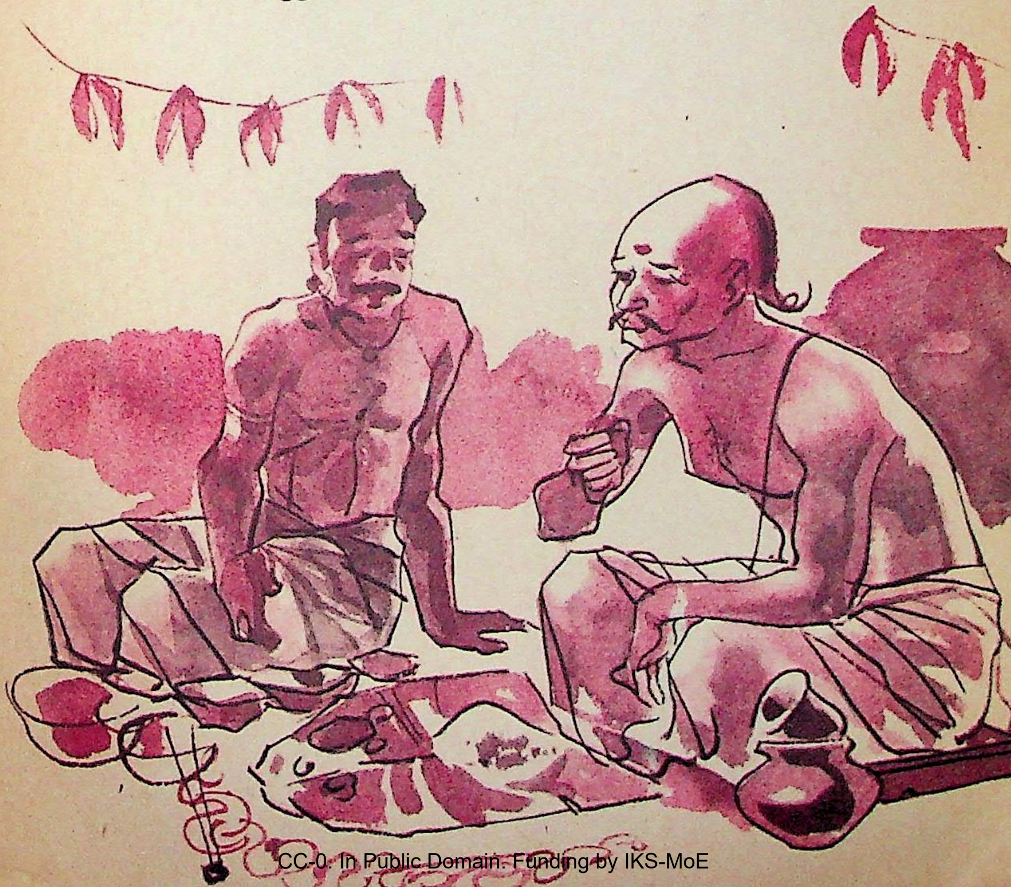
Eknath did not believe in caste distinctions. Once besides the bed of a dried up stream he found an untouchable Mahar caste child lying on the hot sand. Although Eknath was on his way to meditate, having just bathed and worn his clean silk clothes, he picked up the child without hesitation and returned him to his parents.

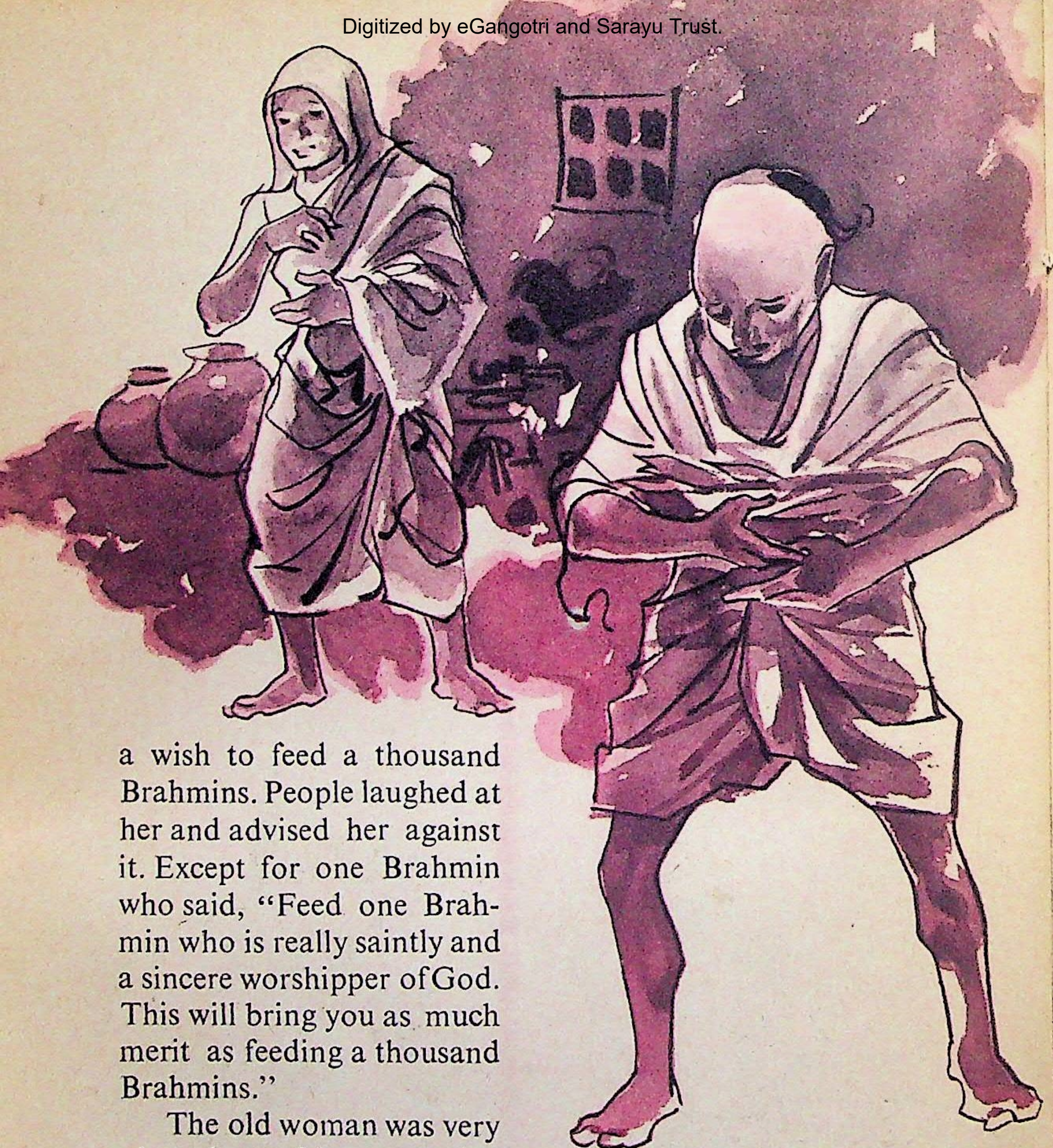
In the same village there lived a sweeper Ranu—a very God-fearing man who never used bad language nor drank or ate meat. His kinsmen referred to him humourously as 'Ranu Pandit'. Ranu was very keen to invite Eknath to his house for a meal. Much to Ranu's overwhelming joy Eknath accepted the invitation. In those days Brahmins shunned even the shadow of an untouchable and here Eknath had readily agreed to eat an untouchable's food.

There was great jubilation in the Mahar colony. Each one decorated his house according to his means. Ranu did up his house as if he was preparing for Diwali—the doorway was festooned with mango leaves and stumps of banana trees planted like pillars; the courtyard was washed with cowdung. People lined both sides of the road to welcome Eknath and as soon as he arrived he was treated with cries of joy. Ranu served Eknath food with great devotion. It was simple food but to Eknath it tasted like nectar. Ranu and his kinsmen were as pleased as if God himself had come to visit them and the entire Mahar colony felt it was in heaven that day.

Once thieves broke into Eknath's house. They had come with great hopes for it was rumoured that Eknath was very wealthy. As the thieves were tying the jewellery and ornaments they had found in a bundle, Eknath and his wife awoke and saw them. Eknath neither raised an alarm nor tried to catch the thieves. On the contrary he took off the ring on his finger and flung it towards them. Startled by the fall of the ring the thieves turned around and saw Eknath sitting quietly looking at them. They were overcome with remorse. Falling at his feet, they swore they would never steal again. Eknath's wife Girijabai cooked a meal for them and saw to all their comforts.

An old beggar woman who lived on alms once expressed





a wish to feed a thousand Brahmins. People laughed at her and advised her against it. Except for one Brahmin who said, "Feed one Brahmin who is really saintly and a sincere worshipper of God. This will bring you as much merit as feeding a thousand Brahmins."

The old woman was very pleased at this suggestion and enquired eagerly, "But where can I find such a

Brahmin?"

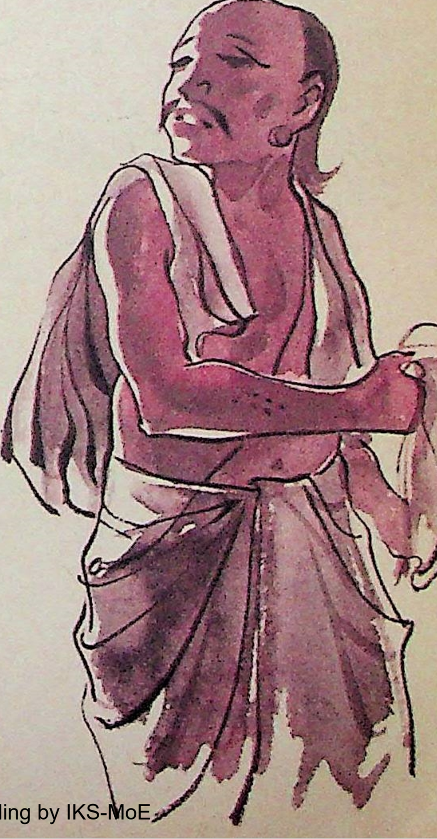
"Eknath" replied the Brahmin. "He lives in your own village."

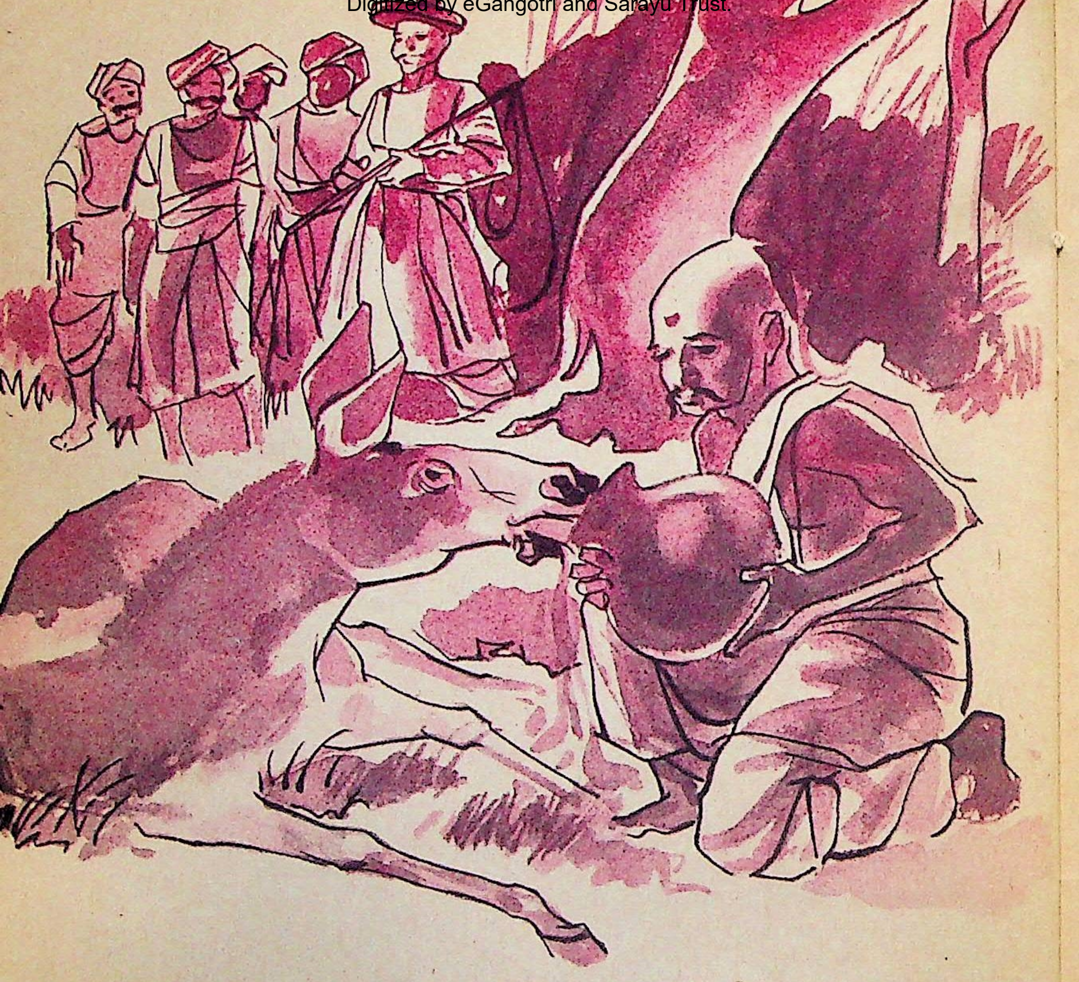
The old woman was overjoyed. She immediately went to Eknath and invited him to a meal. Then she began running around making preparations and elaborate arrangements. Now, Eknath's son Hari Pandit was very orthodox and he did not approve of his father going to the home of the old beggar woman. He, however, accompanied his father.

Eknath ate his fill. After he had finished, he asked his son to remove the leaf on which he had eaten. Hari Pandit did as he was asked but to his amazement there was another used leaf underneath the first one. One after another Hari Pandit removed a thousand leaves. The old woman was speechless.

Hari Pandit was filled with shame. He fell at his father's feet and begged his forgiveness. "You are the incarnation of Lord Brahma," he said. "Forgive me." And from that day Hari Pandit was a changed man. He no longer believed in caste distinctions and developed a respect for all beings.

Once Hari Pandit took a pitcher full of sacred Ganga water from Kashi to Rameshwar. Bringing holy water





from Kashi and sprinkling it at Rameshwar was considered an act of great piety. On the way Hari Pandit stopped at Paithan. The whole village assembled to greet him and do him honour. Among those present was Eknath. It was noon and very hot. On the ground nearby a donkey lay dying of thirst Eknath was filled with pity. He took a little of the Ganga water and poured it in the donkey's mouth. Hari Pandit was furious but what could he say to his father. Giving holy water to a donkey was an act of gross sacrilege and impiety. Besides what pains he, Hari Pandit, had taken to bring the water over such a long distance! The poor man could not sleep that night thinking of the incident. He tossed and turned on his bed. When at long last he fell asleep he dreamt of God Rameshwar. God Rameshwar said, "Hari Pandit, even if you had bathed me with a thousand pitchers of sacred Ganga water you would not have earned as much merit as what Eknath has earned for you by giving water to the dying donkey."

Eknath saw God in every living creature, in every object. Not only did he not make any distinction between man and man but he made no distinction between man and beast.

He translated Sant Gnaneshwars classic work *Ganeshwari* and the great Sanskrit classics into simple Marathi so that everyone could read and understand them. The courage he showed in religious and social matters is reflected in his writings. Thus his fame spread far and wide and from being a local legend he become a national figure. In Kashi they honoured him by taking out his books in a magnificent procession. His two most famous works are *Bhavarth Ramayana* and *Rukmini Swayamvara*.

Rama and Krishna are the beloved gods of the people. They are regarded as the embodiment of all the virtues. They personify beauty, generosity and valour. Eknath was the first writer to tell the story of Rama as narrated by Valmiki in his *Ramayana*. In *Rukmini Swayamvara* Eknath has given expression to his devotion to Krishna.

Eknath's *abhangas* and couplets are rated very high in devotional literature. His teachings have a universal appeal.

His songs are memorised and recited by the people, his milk-maids songs being particularly popular. Though Eknath wrote his couplets in Hindi he could also read and write Urdu.

Eknath said that there should be no selfish motive for worshipping God. There was no need to to go into the wilderness to meditate. It was important to realise that service of mankind was the true service of God. Eknath did not believe in worship that was designed purely to achieve salvation for oneself.

Eknath's life was drawing to a close. He had completed forty-four chapters of his commentaries on the *Ramayana*. When he told his friends and disciples that his end was near, they were overcome with grief. "You must at least complete your commentary on the *Ramayana* before you go," they said. Eknath replied, "It will be completed by Gaonba."

Gaonba was mentally retarded. He could not even speak coherently. Living with Eknath he met saints and holymen and his time was spent listening to religious tales and singing hymns. Gradually he began to speak distinctly and recite *slokas* and became able and learned. It was he who completed the commentaries on the *Ramayana*.

On the sixth day of the month of *Magha*, a most auspicious day, the banks of the river Godavari were crowded with people who had come to take a holy bath. The chanting of *mantras* and singing of hymns filled the air. Eknath quiety slipped away from the crowd and unobserved disappeared into the river.

Eknath was never seen again. But his writings, couplets and songs continue to live after him.

CHANDIDAS

To the east of Boalpur, a few miles away, there is a village called Nannur. About 400 years ago a Brahmin family lived in this village. The Brahmin was priest at the shrine of Basholi. The Brahmin's eldest son was called Chandidas. Chandidas was strong, handsome, full of grace. All who saw him stared in wonder and admiration. But Chandidas was ever lost in some far away, mysterious world of his own. He was not interested in learning the scriptures and studying the sacred texts. After several attempts the Brahmin had given up in despair. He could not succeed in making his son interested in a formal education.

"Do not give him any food today," he told his wife angrily one day, "put some ash in his *thali* instead."

But his mother could not bear to do this. She served the rice first, then on one side, in the corner she placed some ash, for she could not ignore her husband's orders.

"What is this ash for?" Chandidas asked as he began eating. Then his mother told him of his father's angry command. Chandidas stopped eating. He was very sad. Just outside the village was Basholi *Devi's* shrine. The Ajay river flowed past it. From here it ran eastwards to join the Ganga. The *Devi's* presence could be felt everywhere.

With a heavy heart Chandidas sat near the shrine. All round was utter solitude. The wind sighed. The shadows of the *bakul* tree trembled. The waters of the river echoed the sadness in Chandidas' heart.

"Is there any point in my living?" he wondered hopelessly.

Just then the *Devi* began to speak. "Chandidas! do not end your life. You shall be a great poet, a scholar, a saint; people will love you. You will sing songs of humanity and compassion."

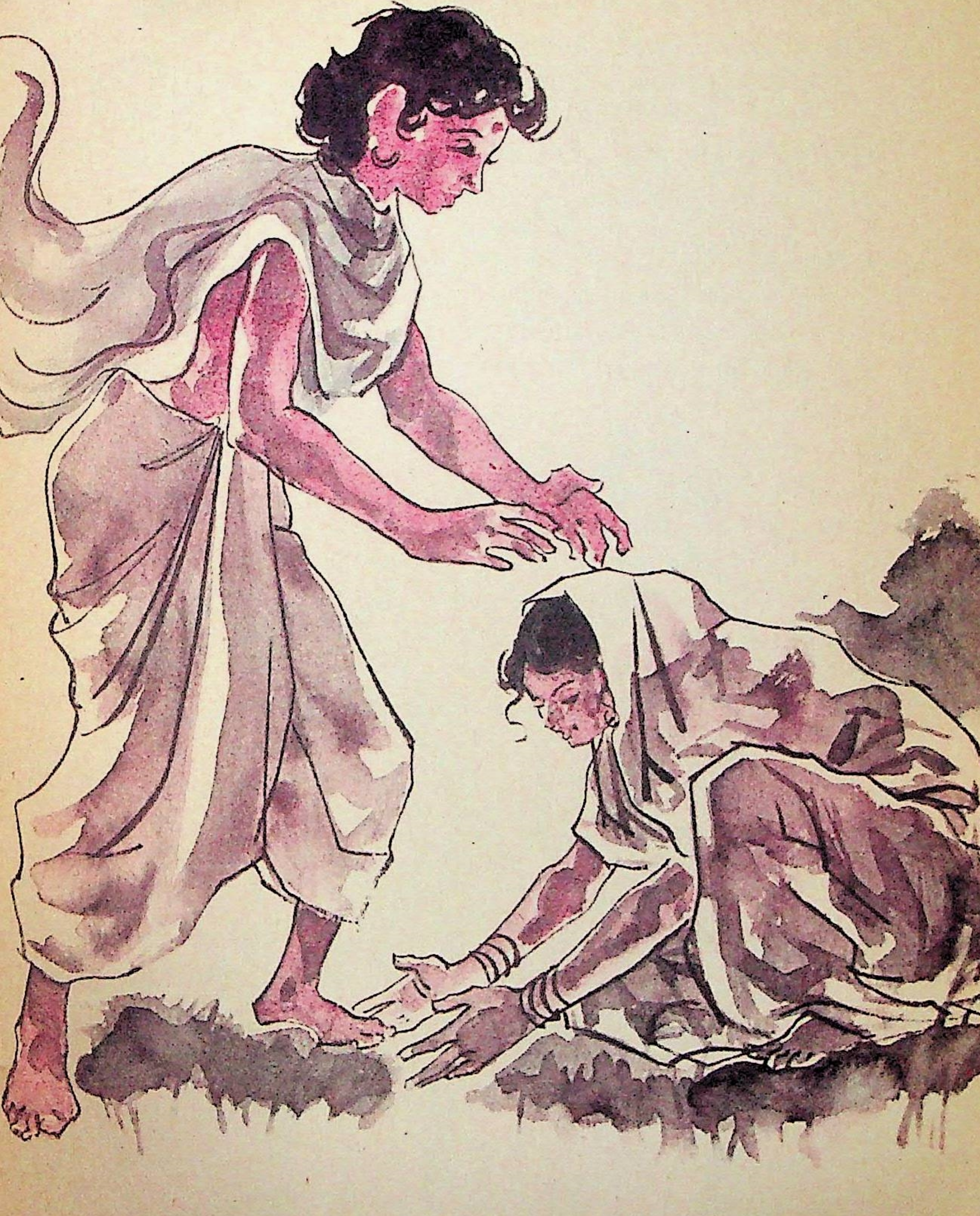
Chandidas turned homewards. The way to his village lay through a grove of palms. In the grove there was a little hut. On the doorstep of the hut stood a beautiful girl. Chandidas walked past, absorbed in his own thoughts. Suddenly he saw her. He stared in amazement. She was beautiful. Perhaps Krishna's Radha was as beautiful. But the girl was a washerman's daughter. Her name was Tara. When Chandidas reached home he wrote his first poem dedicated to Tara.

Innumerable such legends are told about Chandidas' life. The Brahmins and *pandits* do not agree with these. Some say he belonged to Chhatna in Bankura. About his death too there are several different accounts. According to one, the Sultan of Gaud ordered him to be trampled to death by an elephant. And that even as he was thrown from the elephant's back he sang a verse dedicated to Tara.

Tara was a washerman's daughter. To drink water touched by her hand was sacrilege. But for Chandidas she had no caste, no creed. To him she was the source of eternal strength. Just as Radha had been to Krishna.

Chaitanya had accepted in his compassion and love all washerman, shoemaker, the lowborn, the sinner. His religion was the religion of love for all mankind. Chandidas' songs and poems too speak of this universal love. Man and God merge into one.

Chaitanya has said in his autobiography *Chaitanya*

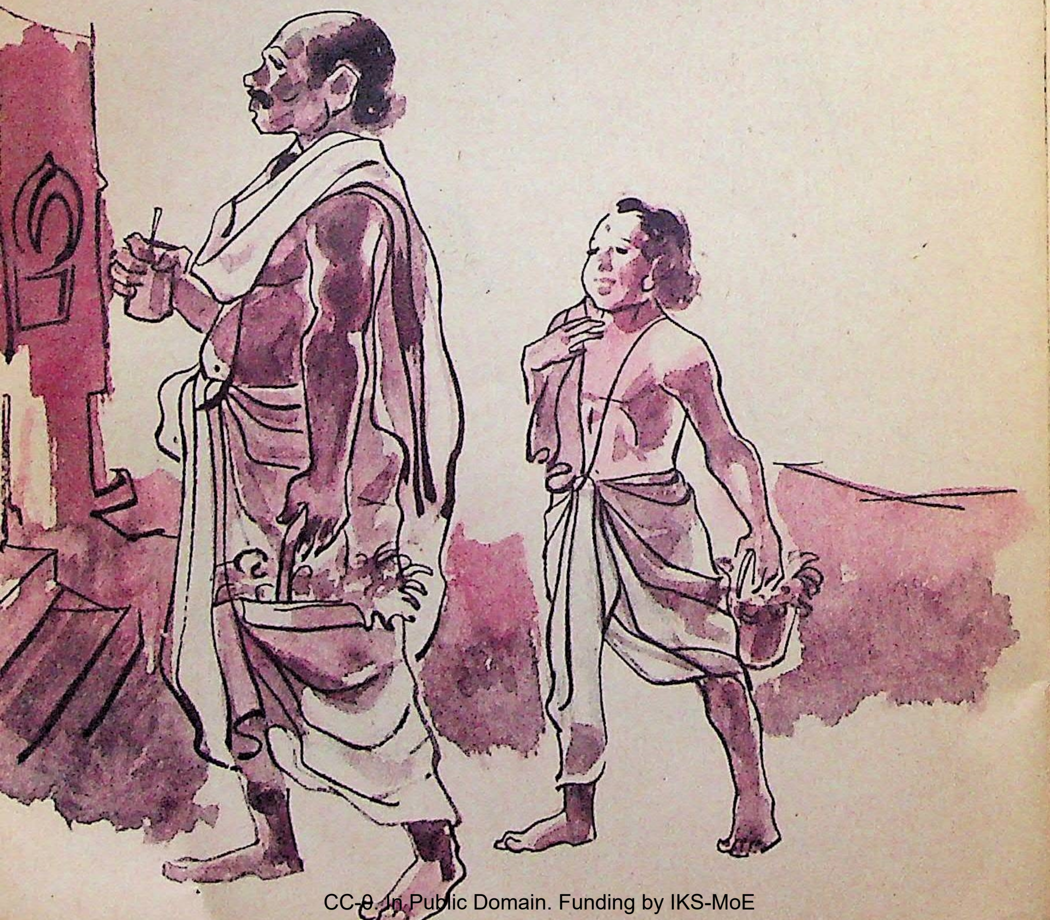


Charitamrita that he was charmed by the exquisite beauty of Chandidas' poetry and writings.

After sometime Chandidas was appointed *purohit* of the shrine of Basholi in his father' place. Basholi Devi and Dharamthakur were worshipped in several places throughout ancient Bengal.

It is believed that Dharamthakur was later worshipped as Siva and Vishalakshi Devi was an incarnation of Basholi.

Although Chandidas was now *purohit* at the shrine, he found himself restless and dissatisfied with the rituals, rites and ceremonies. He felt the urge to contemplate, to spend



his time in meditation. He wrote songs, composed verses to Krishna. And the people of Nannur thought Chandithakur had become mad.

Tara could not forget Chandidas after that first glimpse in the grove of palms. When Chandidas came to bathe at the river Tara forgot the clothes she had to wash. She gazed at him spellbound as though he were some divine being. His songs enchanted her. She felt she had been listening to them for centuries.

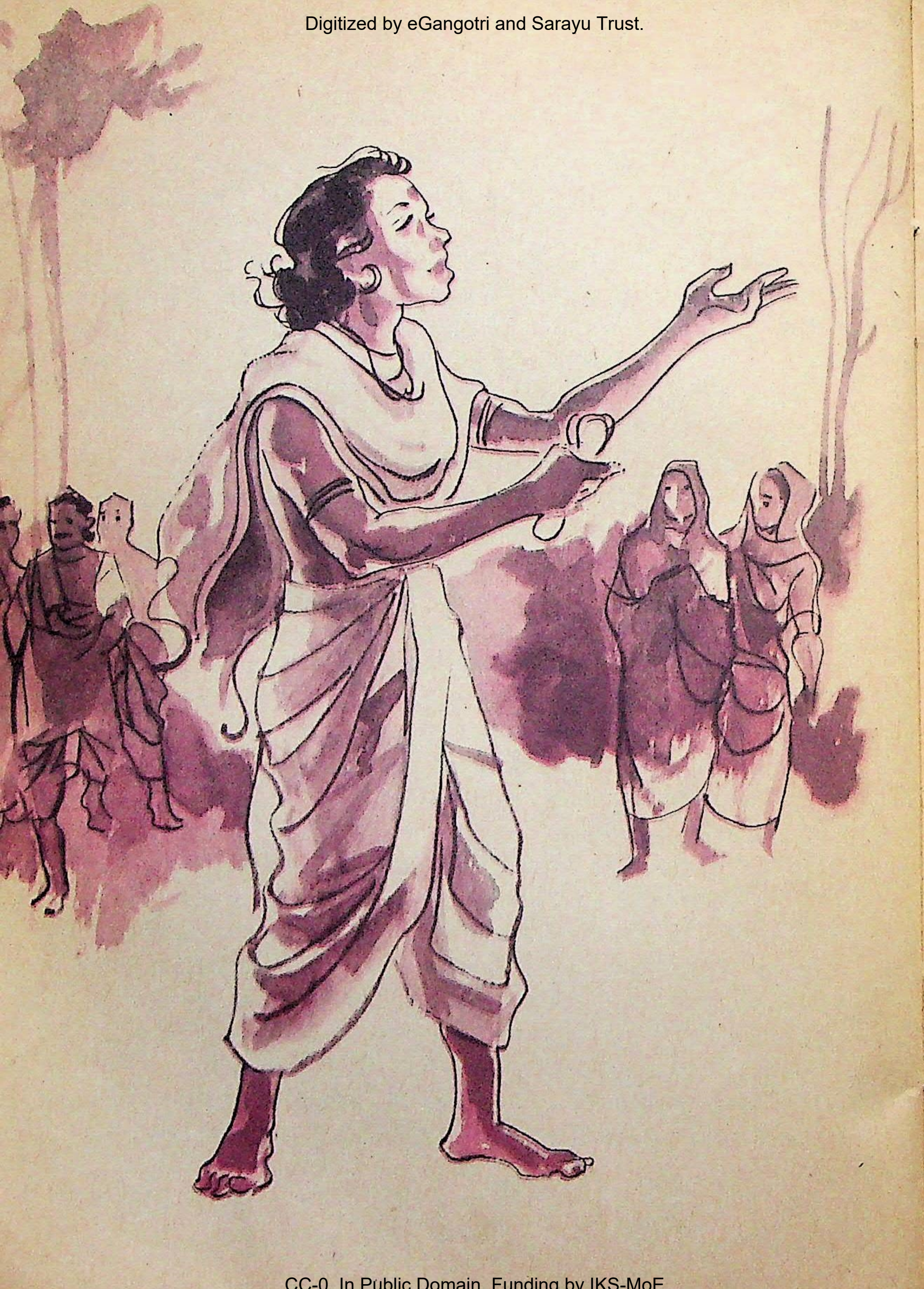
Basholi or Chaumandi is the goddess of terror, but her other aspect is peace and she is called Tara. It is believed that it was this form which came to Chandidas as Tara, the washerwoman. Her name may have been Rami or Ramitara. Rami is more popularly known. The account of her meeting Chandidas is related even today. Their names will always be linked together. Without Rami one cannot think of Chandidas, just as one cannot think of Krishna witnout Radha or of Siva without Parvati. At any rate the story is that Basholi Devi inspired his songs.

Bharmite Bharmite Nannur Gramite
Pravesh Jayia Kare

(In the course of her wanderings she reached Nannur).

In Chandidas' love for Rami there was no room for consideration of caste or creed. Chandidas was a highborn Brahmin, a priest. He was handsome beyond description, yet he loved a lowcaste washerwoman. Oblivious of everything else he sang hymns and wrote poems. Rami sang with him. Wherever he went she was with him like his shadow.

People gossipped. It was a disgrace, shameful! The priests called it sacrilege. Religion had been defiled. In those



days the cult of Tantra was very powerful. The tantrics were angry. They parcticed all their rites and *mantras* to cure Chandidas of this obsession.

One evening Chandidas was waiting to meet Rami. It began raining. He waited and looked out for her but Rami did not come. Chandidas went towards Rami's house. The rain fell ceaselessly. Rami was at home. She was talking to a friend and so absorbed was she that she forgot she had to meet Chandidas and that he was waiting for her.

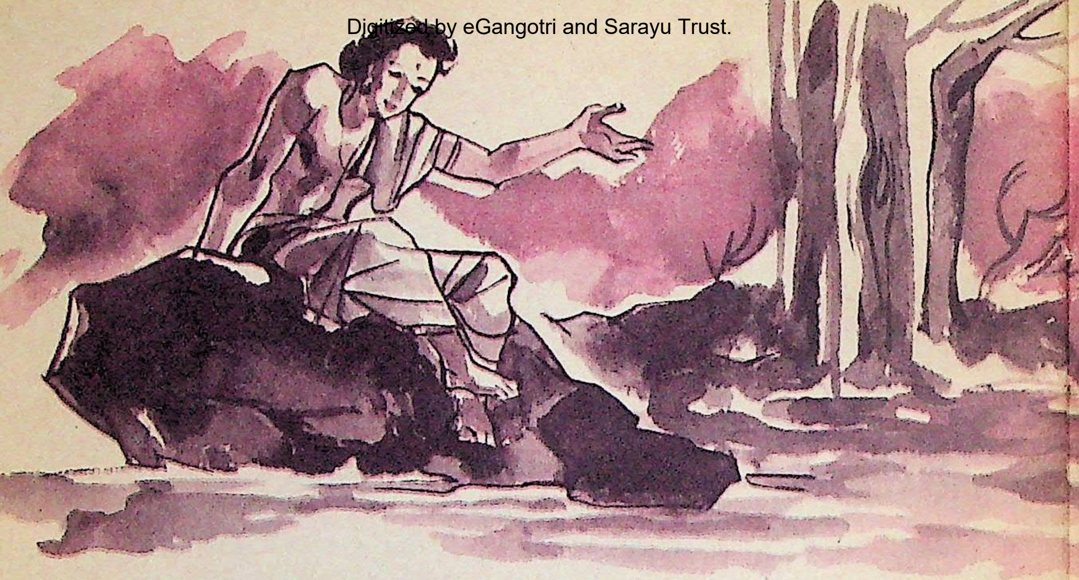
Chandidas stood patiently under a tree in the rain. It was very dark. Hearing a sound Rami came out of the house. She saw Chandidas. He was drenched and shivering with the cold. Rami scolded him. "Why did you come in such heavy rain?"

When he returned home Chandidas wrote one of his most popular songs.

Stories about them spread from Katwa to Tarapith. When the popularity of Vaishnav literature was growing in the areas of the Gangetic plains, Chandidas created a new form of verse. The entire populace was enchanted and came to hear the songs of Rami and Chandidas.

Chandidas' father was deeply disturbed. All the codes, the social order he valued would be overthrown. The Brahmins and tantrics were furious. Rami and Chandidas' relationship was a threat to religion itself. Chandidas had one brother called Nakul. Nakul held an important position in the Nawab's *Darbar*. He was embarrassed and bent his head in shame. People taunted him.

Just then Chandidas' father, overcome with grief, died. "We shall not take part in the funeral," the Brahmins



declared. Nakul tried his best to persuade them.

"We shall go only if Chandidas takes penance and is purified. Otherwise we cannot attend the *Shradh* ceremony.

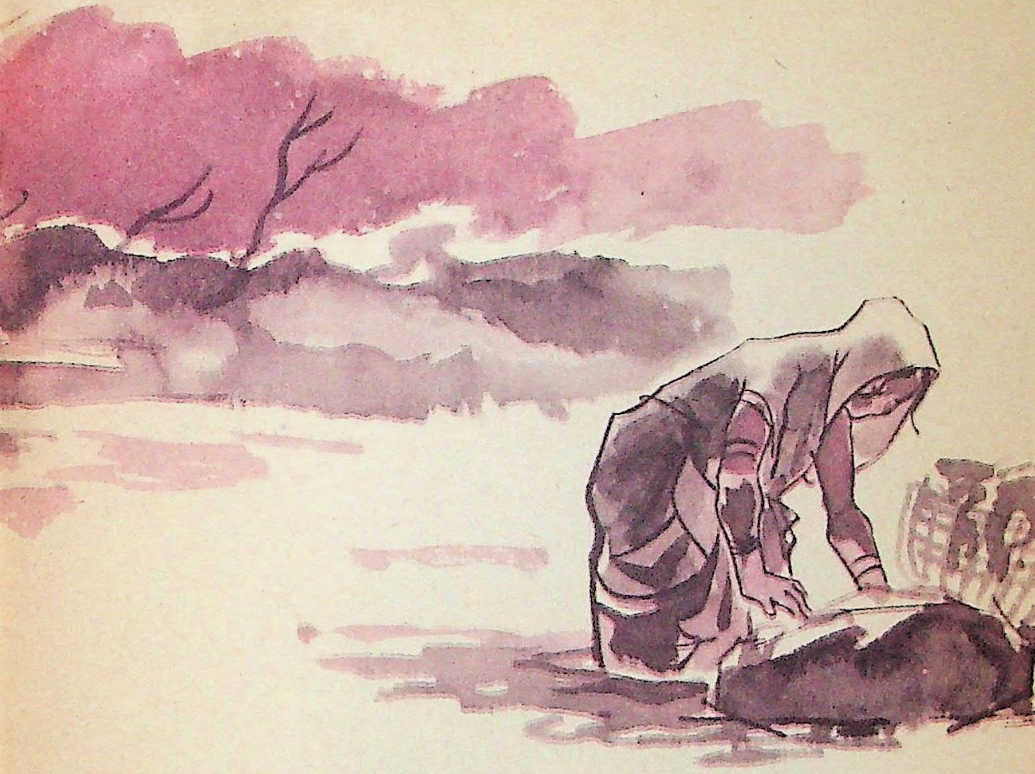
Chandidas was helpless. His father's last rites could not be performed. Rami was an untouchable. He would have to give her up. Chandidas wandered from place to place in despair. He pleaded with his brother, fell at his feet. But Nakul ignored his pleas.

At last Chandidas agreed. Unless he purified himself before the sacred fire his father's soul would find no peace. He knew great injustice was being done to Rami. Within him was unbearable pain.

The priests purified him with the ceremonial bath. The sacred fire was lit. Just then Rami came running looking for him. Her face was wet with tears.

"Chandithakur are you taking penance for me? Will you leave me?"

Chandidas was torn with doubt. There was a great struggle within him, a terrible conflict. "What is religion? Is it hatred and contempt for other human beings? What could be



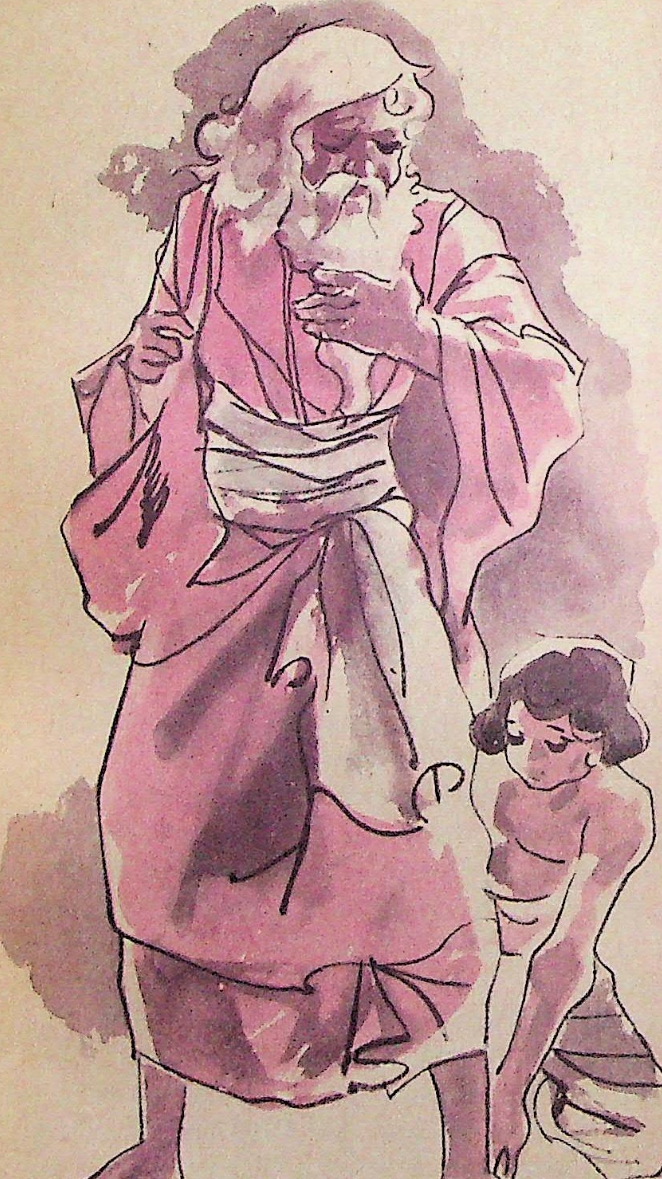
greater sacrilege. If he took penance today for loving Rami, were not his songs, his poems all meaningless?

"Let me go." he said quietly addressing the priests. The Brahmins stopped him. Just then a loud noise was heard, sounds of shouting and cries. Rami's hut in the woods had been set on fire. Now Chandidas did not take long to make up his mind. He caught Rami's hand and led her away.

They stopped at Rajur at the house of Ganesh the singer, who sang hymns. Now he was free of all restrictions of rite, ritual, caste. Day and night he sang and people thronged to hear him. Potters, cobblers, singers,—all came to hear him.

No one is low-born he told them all. Chaitanya's creed was to love one's fellow beings. That was the only way to find God. Through his songs and verse Chandidas too spread this message all his life.

KABIR



Five hundred years ago at Lahartara near Kashi a weaver, Niru and his wife Neema found a little baby in the wilderness. It was happily sucking its thumb and looking around wide-eyed. Neema's heart melted with love. The child had been abandoned by its parents in a lonely spot. Neema persuaded her husband to let her take the baby home with them.

When they got home Niru decided to give the child a name. As was customary they sent for the Kazi and asked him to find a name from the Holy Book. The Kazi opened the *Koran*. The name that appeared was 'Akbar'. He tried again and it was 'Kubra'. Both words mean 'Great' and were used for God. The Kazi was perturbed. How could a humble weaver's son have a name like that? However, the child came to be named Kabir.

This foundling adopted by a common weaver was destined to become a famous saint and social reformer.

Kabir was no ordinary mortal. Many extraordinary stories are told of the manner of his birth. To this day no one knows who his real parents were. There are many legends current about his parentage.

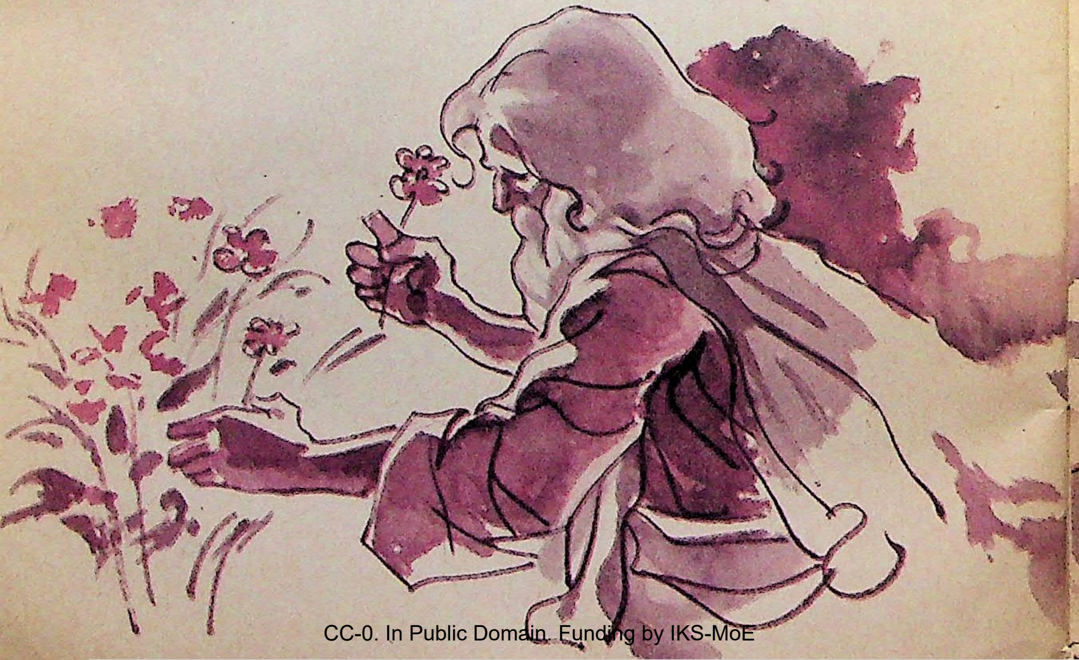
According to one version a Brahmin took his widowed daughter to visit Swami Ramanand. When the girl touched the Swami's feet to greet him, without finding out anything about her the Swamiji blessed her, "May you have a son."

The Brahmin was very upset. "Swamiji, what kind of blessing have you given her? My daughter is a widow."

Swami Ramanand pondered over his words and then replied, "My blessing cannot prove untrue. But be assured her son will become a great sage."

It is said that after this incident the girl developed a boil on her hand. After some time the boil burst and what fell on the ground assumed human form. This child was named 'Kabir'—one born from the hand. Similar stories of the miraculous birth of Kabir became common.

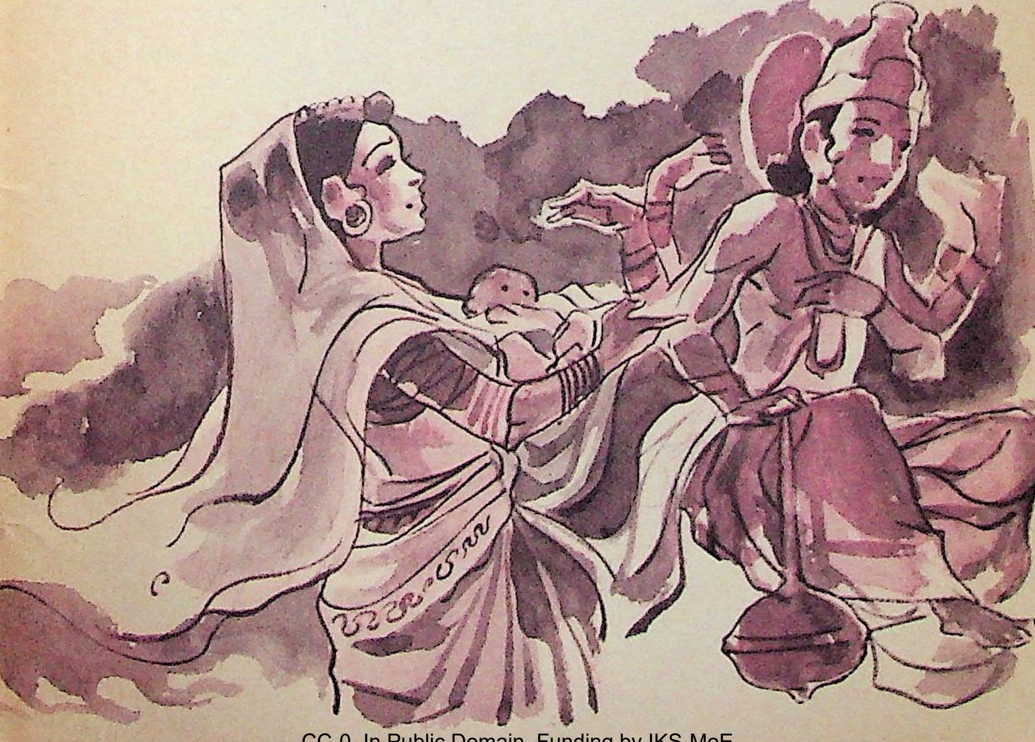
Though brought up in a Muslim weaver's family Kabir began to recite the names of Hindu gods—Ram, Govind and Hari. This angered both the Muslims and the Hindus. The Muslims were upset because Kabir chanted the names of Hindu gods; and the Hindus did not like Kabir preaching against idol worship, blind faith and the caste system. The Hindus further objected to Kabir who was Muslim practising the rituals of a Hindu Vaishnavite. "Who is your Guru?" The people would ask him, for the Vashnavites believe that



one who does not have a Guru will not attain salvation. Kabir tired of having such loaded questions and taunts flung at him.

In the Kashi of those days, the saint held in great esteem was Swami Ramanand. People came from far and near to hear him preach. Kabir decided to take him on as his Guru.

Every morning when it was still dark Swami Ramanand used to bathe in the river Ganga. One day when he was on his way to the river, he felt something touch his feet. Swamiji was startled and exclaimed, "Ram, Ram!" It was Kabir who had been lying in wait for him. He took Swamiji's exclamation of God's name as his *Guru Mantra*—the magic word he should recite—and announced to everyone that it was Swami Ramanand who had given him the gift of God's



name. Niru and Neema were very upset that Kabir had given up his Muslim faith and had taken on Hindu customs like smearing ash on his forehead and wearing a rosary of basil beads around his neck. The Hindus were equally annoyed that Swami Ramanand had given the sacred word to a Muslim. When Ramanand was told about it he was very surprised. "But I didn't give any *Guru Mantra* to any Muslim," he protested. He sent for Kabir and questioned him. Kabir told him of the incident near the bank of the Ganga. Swami Ramanand was very pleased and accepted Kabir as his disciple.

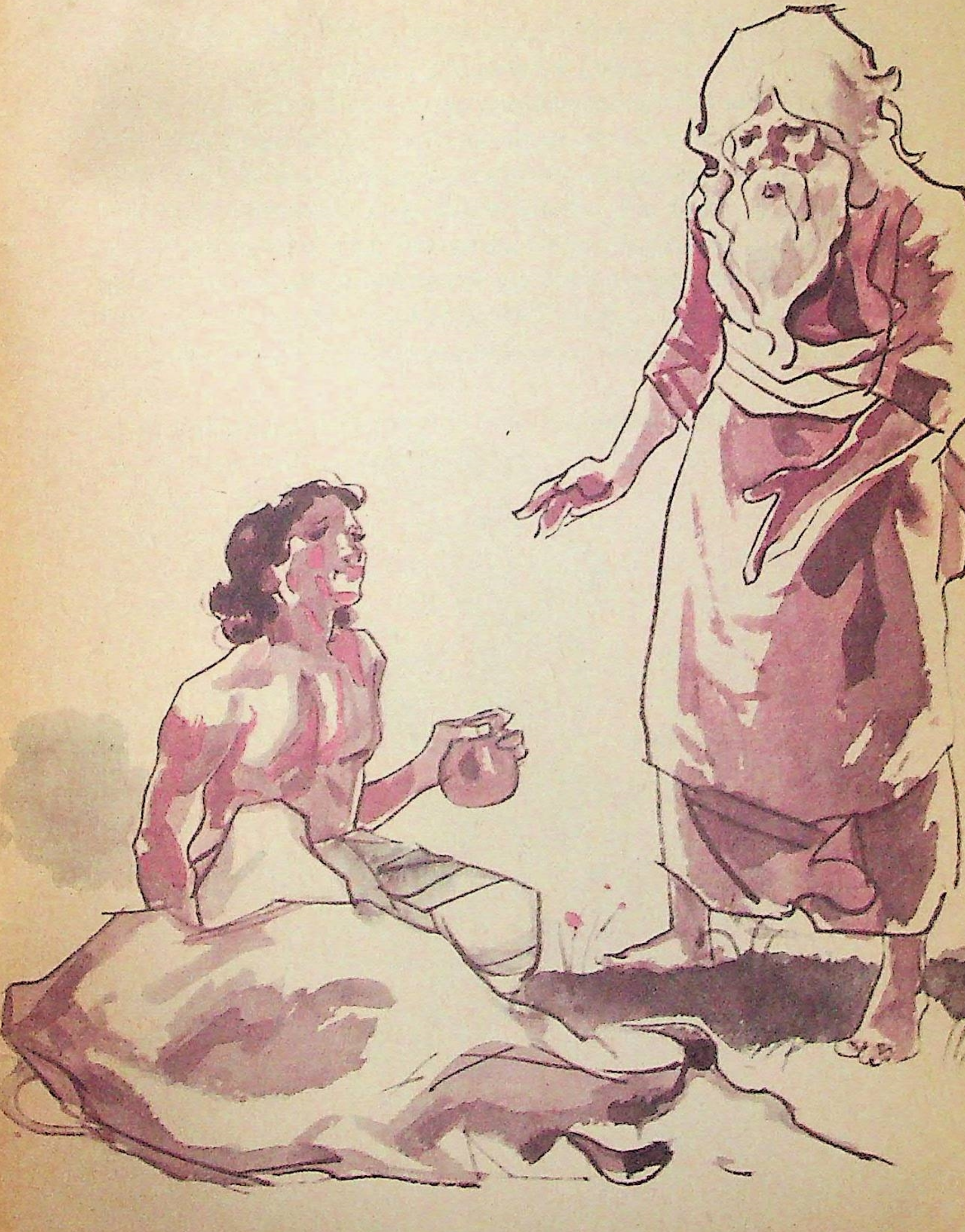
Kabir was a man of extraordinary intellect and perception. His own Guru acknowledged him as his master. Once at Ramanand's ashram ceremonies were being performed in the memory of dead ancestors. On this day it was customary to cook the favourite food of the one whose memory was being venerated. One of Ramanand's ancestors was specially fond of cow's milk. Ramanand asked Kabir to fetch some from the bazar. Kabir set off with a bucket· On the way he came across a dead cow. He put some grass before it and waited.

It was very late. Everything was ready for the ceremony. But there was no sign of Kabir. Swami Ramanand who went to look for him came upon him standing near the dead cow. " What are you doing?" Ramanand asked.

Kabir answered, "Guruji the cow won't either give milk or eat the fodder."

"How silly you are!" Ramanand said breaking into a laugh. "This cow is dead! How can she eat the grass."

If a cow that has just died can't eat grass how can your



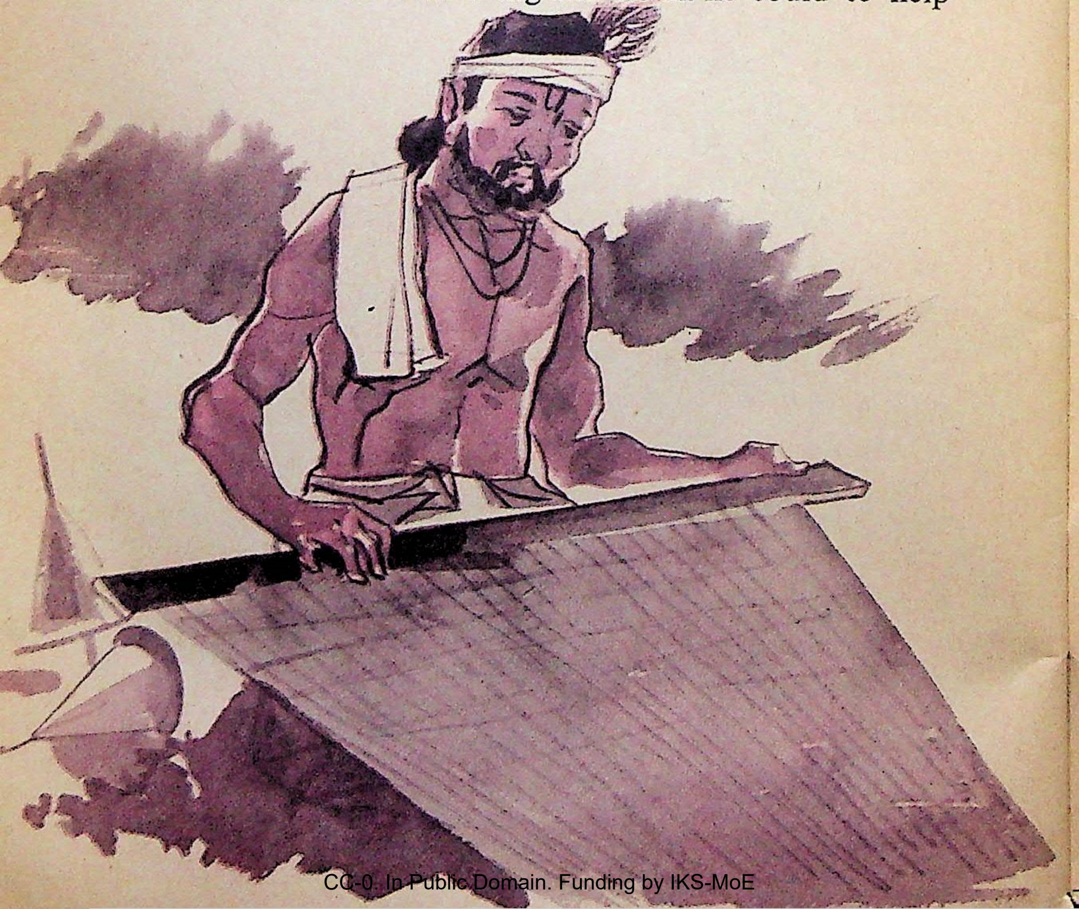
forefathers who died years ago drink milk?" asked Kabir.

Swami Ramanand had nothing more to say.

Kabir was a householder as well as a saint. He carried out his daily tasks with enthusiasm as he believed that the best way to worship God was to fulfil one's duty. The flowers of one's efforts smelt sweeter and were more acceptable to God than the most expensive gifts offered to Him.

Kabir used to get so absorbed working his loom that he often felt he was in the presence of God. Many similes and metaphors in his hymns were drawn from the craft of weaving.

Kabir worked for his living and did all he could to help



others. He wove cloth and sold it in the market without the slightest interest in making money. His heart was full of love and compassion. One day a Brahmin came to the bazar and wailed piteously, "I am very poor. I do not have a paisa in my pocket. Please give me something to cover my nakedness." The kind-hearted Kabir gave him half the bale of cloth he had with him. But some beggars are very greedy. This Brahmin was like that. Not satisfied with half the bale he asked for more. Kabir gave him the remaining half of the bale. The Brahmin departed showering blessings on Kabir.

Kabir had no money left to take home to buy food. Sad and dejected he sat down in a corner of the bazar.

Three days passed. His household went hungry for Kabir had no savings. Whatever money he earned from selling cloth was spent in buying provisions. There was no food for Neema to cook. Famished and starving she waited for Kabir.

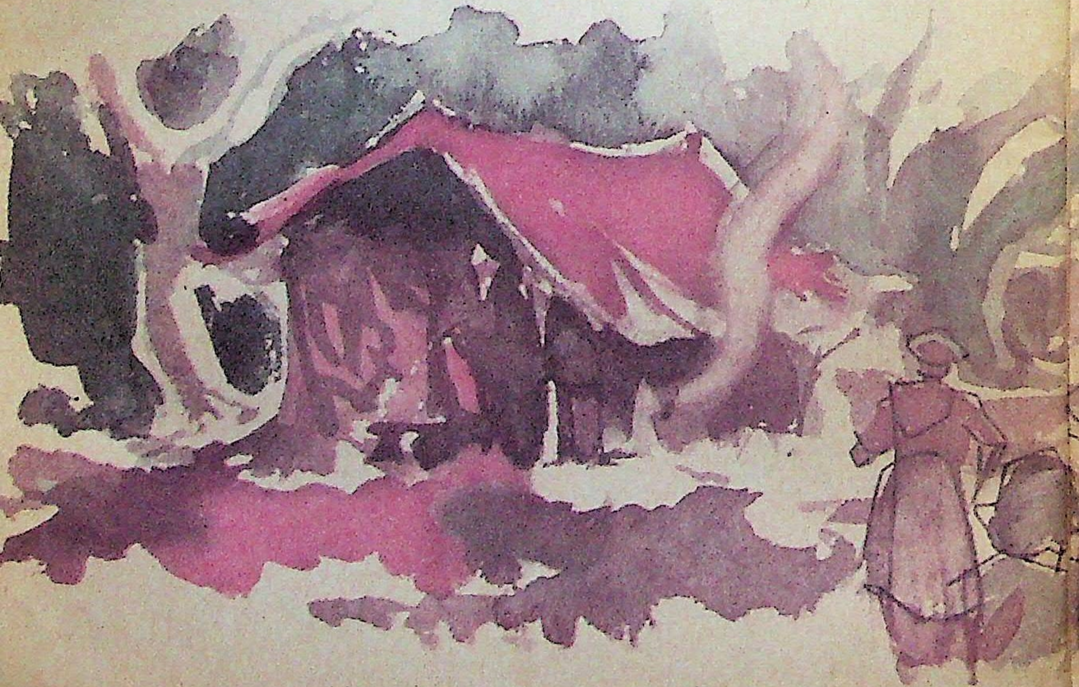
Suddenly a man drove up an ox laden with provisions and said, "Your son has sent this." But Kabir's mother knew that her son would never accept favours from anyone and refused to take the provisions.

The man changed his story and said, "A prince who came on a visit to Kashi Vishwashwar sent this as a token of his pleasure." When Kabir returned home he heard the whole story. He realised that it was God himself who had come to help him. He became even more firm in his faith then before.

Kabir's wife's name was Loi. It is believed that she had become Kabir's disciple.

The story goes that Loi lived alone in a small hut. One day Kabir accompanied by two sadhus arrived at her door. She welcomed them and offered them a bowlful of milk each. The two sadhus drank their milk but Kabir said, "An ascetic who has performed many penances is on his way here. He is very hungry and will need this milk more than I." And a little later the ascetic arrived looking very starved.

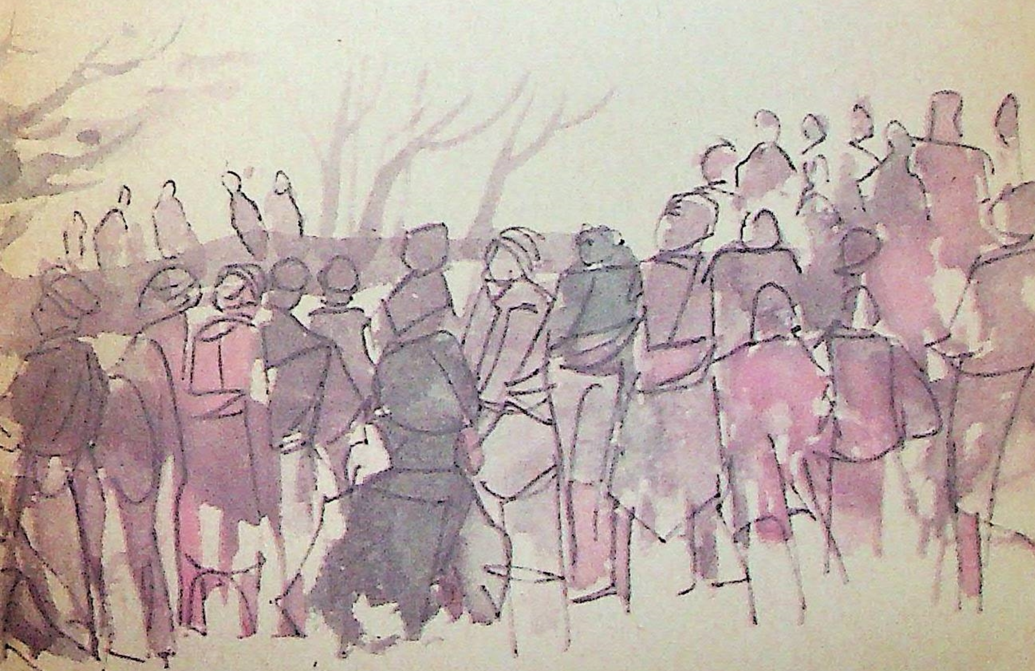
Kabir offered him his bowl of milk. The ascetic put the bowl to his lips and swallowed the contents in one gulp and blessed Kabir. Loi was amazed at Kabir's spirit of self-sacrifice. She caught a glimpse of the boundless compassion in his heart and realised that he had divine vision. Loi became a follower of Kabir. She served him and this made her life meaningful.



Kabir was a very good poet. He wrote couplets, verses and parables to explain his thoughts to the people. Through his poems he conveyed the true purpose of religion. Kabir was against rites and rituals. He proclaimed confidently that he had won God by love.

Kabir believed in doing good deeds. He disliked the caste system. He spoke openly against the hypocrisy and insincerity of the priests who had made a monopoly of religion and thus raised the ire of orthodox Hindus as well as Muslims. But the common people loved him and flocked in the thousands to see him.

Kabir's growing fame combined with his outspoken manner and indifference to worldly wealth or recognition angered the guardians of religion as well as the authorities of state. Hindu pandits and Muslim mullas laid complaints against him. The ruling monarch Sultan Sikander was very



rigid in matters of religion. When he heard that Kabir did not show any respect for the established religion or to the priests he was very angry. The priests did their best to incite him against Kabir. Like Bhakt Prahlad, Kabir had to go through many ordeals. With God's grace he came out unscathed. Suffering was like the fire which cleanses gold of its impurities. His circle of followers increased and the people sang praises of him.

The Hindus believed that anyone who died in Kashi went straight to heaven but anyone who died in Maghar would be reborn an ass. To disprove this supersition Kabir decided to end his life in Maghar. Thousands of Kabir's followers gathered there. As the hour of his death drew near Kabir went to a small hut and closed the door. after some time a flame emerged from the hut. Kabir's soul had risen to heaven.

The Hindus and Muslims began to quarrel over Kabir's remains. The Hindus said, "We will cremate his body. That is the custom among our people." But the Muslims wanted to bury him. "We will make him a pir," they said. The quarrel became bitter and violent. It is said that then a voice from heaven spoke, "Do not fight. Open the hut." When the hut was opened they found a heap of roses under a sheet. The Hindus and Muslims divided them and made monuments in memory of Kabir according to their different customs. The flowers faded but the freshness and fragrance of Kabir's verses lives on.

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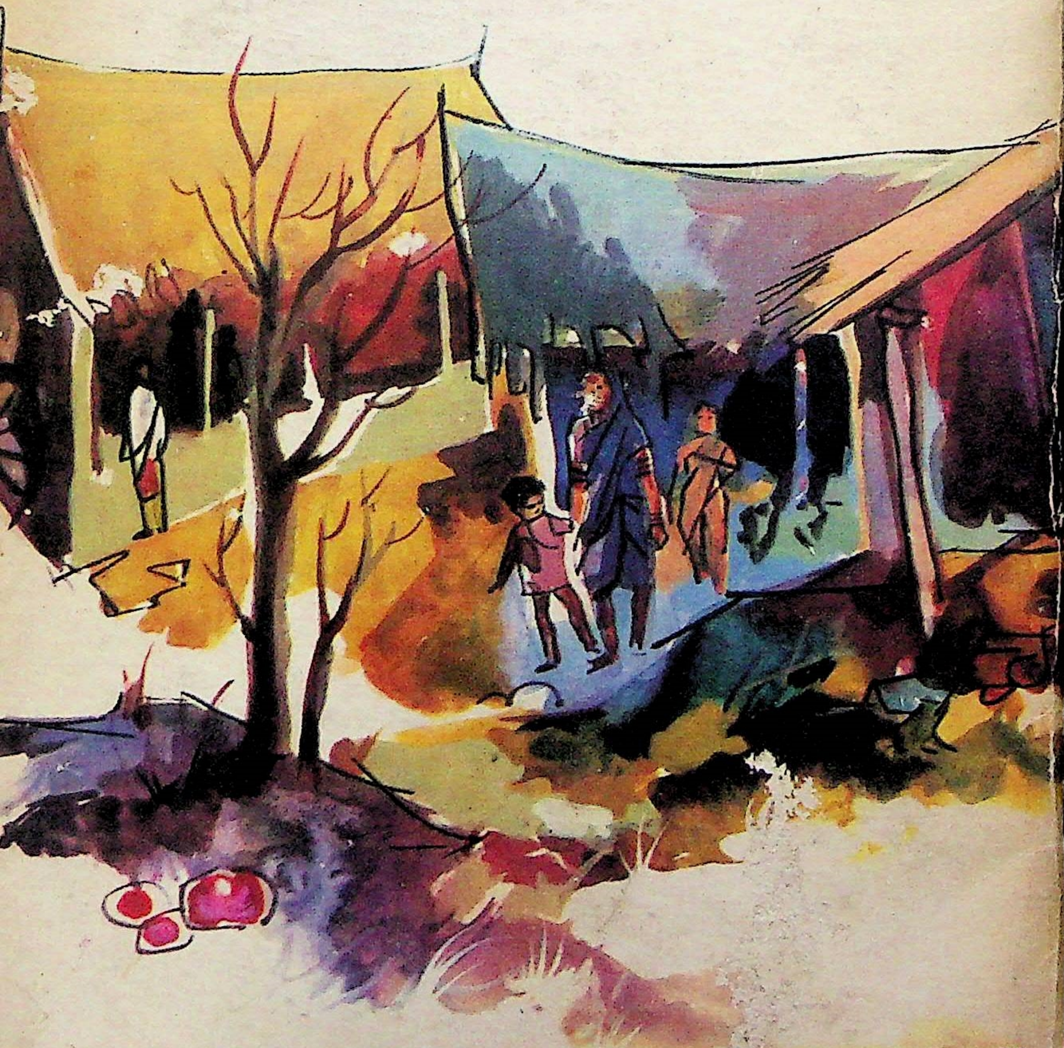

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